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A novel by
Robert Grossbach
based on the screenplay by
Neil Simon

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**It can be fun
to eavesdrop**

- When you're listening and watching the action in a deluxe hotel suite.
- When the couples carrying on are famous movie stars and writers, crazy doctors and a nice middle-class couple caught live in a situation they wouldn't want to be caught dead in.
- When the laughter is sometimes close to tears and the hilarity has undertones of pain.
- When the situations are lined up and one-lined by Neil Simon.
- When the novel is written by Robert Grossbach who wrote the best-selling **THE GOODBYE GIRL** and **THE CHEAP DETECTIVE** novels based on Neil Simon's screenplays.

Go ahead . . .
eavesdrop on

Neil Simon's
CALIFORNIA SUITE

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Robert Grossbach

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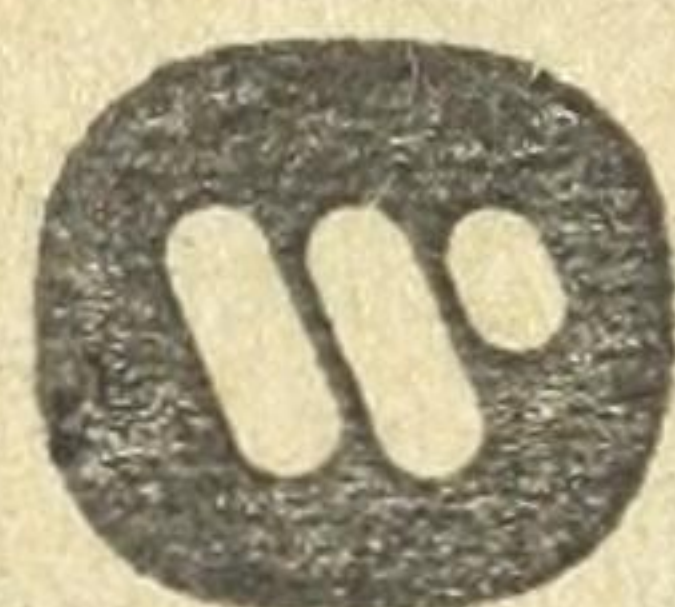
CALIFORNIA SUITE

A novelization by

ROBERT GROSSBACH

based on the screenplay by

NEIL SIMON



WARNER BOOKS

A Warner Communications Company

*To my friend,
STU LITT,
who kept losing the data.*

WARNER BOOKS EDITION

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1

Diana watched herself on the small screen and heard her voice in the plastic headset, but in her mind's eye she was climbing the steps of the podium. The television lights were blazing brightly as she strode toward Burt Reynolds, whose arms were outstretched, proffering the little golden statue. When she reached him, he kissed her on the lips (cleverly angling away from the cheek she offered), and as she approached the lectern and raised the Oscar aloft, the applause became tumultuous. The audience began to rise. . . .

Next to her, Sidney was feigning sleep. He always feigned sleep on airplanes, partly because he was afraid of flying (and used the sleep to cover his fear), but mainly now because Diana's movie was being shown. The combination of Diana's movie and flying made Sidney opt for simulated unconsciousness.

On the screen a small, single-engine Piper Cub bounced woefully around in the sky. At the controls was

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a young man, Harold (played by Billy Crystal, from the *Soap* TV cast), and next to him, looking cool and radiant, was Diana herself, as Wendy Berk. Always, her *Britishness* shone through, the calm English dignity in the face of anything; she was powdering her nose.

"Where's the airport?" screamed Harold on-screen. "There's no airport!"

The little plane lurched and jerked uncontrollably. Bone-shattering vibrations filled the cabin.

"Look for an airport!" yelled Harold.

Wendy raised her eyebrows. "Oh, don't make such a fuss," she said coolly. "Just put it down among the—what are those horrid things?—oh yes, cacti, you call them. Appropriate name. Put it down among the cacti."

Harold shouted above the din of the engine. "What do you mean, just put it down? The hell with down, I'm lucky I can keep it *up*. I told you I never flew before."

Wendy winced. "Don't shout," she shouted. "Shouting is gross. And particularly don't shout at me, I'm a first-class passenger."

"You're a first-class lunatic!" said Harold. "It's all over, Wendy. Our relationship has about a quarter of a gallon to go."

Wendy manufactured a look of earnest concern, which made the off-screen Diana want to puke. "Yes, but you do love me, Harold? I know it's an awkward time to bring it up, but I must know . . . for our future."

The Piper suddenly went into a dive. Harold screamed as the earth hurtled dizzily upward to meet them.

They really shouldn't show this kind of thing on a flight, thought Diana, tugging at her headset, which had been slowly penetrating her ears. People are frightened enough already without seeing movies about plane

crashes. Especially bad movies. Bad *comic* movies. Even if the leading actress was up for an Academy Award. She let her mind drift again to the podium, where the applause (after several minutes) had finally died down.

Ladies and gentlemen of the Academy, friends, honored guests: it has been a long and often tortuous road to get to this point in my life, but now, here, I can think only of this moment. It is as if the past does not exist, the pain has finally ebbed, the struggle and brutality and inhumanity are washed away. This—here she would hold up the statue—is the world's greatest therapist!

The audience laughed, but Diana knew it was a rotten speech. She ought to say something memorable. It could be anything at all as long as it set her apart from the parade of bland faces blabbering their falling-on-their-knees gratitude and thanking everyone in sight. There was enough phoniness in the world, and in Hollywood it was as ubiquitous as the smog.

I would like to thank my agent, my director, my wonderful co-stars, and most of all, my husband, Sidney. I would like to thank them—but I can't. (Audience gasp.) They did nothing for me. Didn't actively hurt me, as have many of my former associates and "supporters" in this business, but certainly didn't help. Whatever I am, I am through my own efforts. Wherever I've gotten, I'm there in spite of, not because of, people like these. This—again the raised statue—is for me.

Still no good, thought Diana. Ridiculous. Too bitter. No one loves bitterness. Look like an ass.

On-screen, the Piper still plummeted earthward. "If you like short romances," blubbered Harold. "Yes! I love you!"

Suddenly, the little plane pulled out of its dive. A shot of the cockpit showed that Wendy had taken over the controls.

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"I'm so glad," she said unflappably. "Unrequited love is such a bore."

Harold looked at her in utter amazement. "You—you can fly?"

Wendy shrugged. "Well, it's not all *that* difficult. It's like making love. You just have to know what to touch."

And with that she lowered her lids (this phrase somehow always reminded Diana of gallon cans of paint) and smiled. The plane banked and headed off toward the horizon where an impossible sunset awaited. Diana removed the headset as the final credits began to roll.

After a moment, she reached across the pretend-sleeping Sidney and raised the windowshade. The bright California sunshine poured through and spotlighted the dancing dust motes in the cabin. Even first class had its dust, although no doubt it was a better variety of dust than in tourist. Witless ending, Diana thought now, as the last credit crawled down the screen. Coarse. Crude. Her mind went back to the Academy. The award would be . . . posthumous. Yes. That was it. Good.

For a moment, Burt Reynolds seemed flustered. Even his easy good looks and swagger, his ersatz Marlon Brando handsomeness couldn't save him from just that moment of panic. After all, sixty million people were watching. Sixty bloody million. (God, Americans were daft!) Then he caught the cue from the director, the hand-lettered sign held aloft. *Accepting for Miss Barrie, her husband, Sidney.* Reynolds seemed relieved. The statue rested loosely in his hand.

Sidney walked spryly up to the stage, accepted the Oscar briskly, and waited for the applause to die down. *My wife worked very hard at her profession, exceedingly hard, and she died feeling that it was all for nothing. In her lifetime she received precious little recognition—it is a fact—from critics too busy and self-occu-*

plied to care, an indifferent public, and even, where it counted the most, from—his voice broke—from her own friends and family, those closest. Sidney looked at the statue. What does this mean? Can it bring her back? She doesn't know, she'll never know because she's gone and—

Suddenly, there was a commotion in the audience. A woman stood up, began shouting as the TV cameras frantically swung around. *I'm not gone. I'm here. I'm here, darling!* It was Diana, and she was running for the stage, arms outstretched, the audience in a paroxysm of cheering, maniacal applause. *I'm not dead; it was a ruse.* The crowd went crazy as Sidney's mouth fell open. . . .

Sidney's mouth was open, his lips slack. His heavy, black-framed glasses rested low on his nose.

"Come on," said Diana brightly, nudging him in the side.

"Mmm. Mmm?"

"Oh, come on, already. You can stop pretending to be asleep, Sidney. It's over."

Sidney blinked his eyes open. A lock of his gray-blond hair lay pasted against his forehead. He removed his headset. "I was listening to the Beethoven Ninth," he said groggily.

Diana nodded skeptically.

"Somewhere on this plane," continued Sidney, "there is a *wonderful* orchestra."

Diana reached down under the seat in front of her and withdrew a large handbag. From the handbag, she extracted a brush and began fixing her hair.

"The cameraman must do luggage commercials. All you could see were the bags under my eyes."

Sidney grinned, his thin, slightly cruel lips curling upward. "Eyes without bags, my dear, would be unable to convey life's cargo of experience."

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Diana turned and looked at him slowly. "You made that up?"

Sidney gave a single nod. "After all this time, I'd expect you to be aware of my talent for the nuances of bullshit."

Diana had her mouth open to respond, when a stewardess leaned over.

"We'll be landing in Los Angeles in five minutes, Miss Barrie."

Diana shook her head. "Well, I suppose we must." She turned back to Sidney, who had just sneezed. "Your ordeal will soon be over."

Sidney sneezed again. "Ozone," he said.

"What?"

"Ozone. The planes have been flying a couple of thousand feet higher to save fuel and make time, except there's more ozone at these altitudes and it gets into the cabin." He blew his nose into a handkerchief. "Nasty stuff, that. Irritates the mucous membranes, the blood vessels, gives you headaches. Real rot."

Diana shrugged. "My membranes aren't irritated. Perhaps it's selective. And why would anyone know about something like that? Where do you hear these things, and why on earth do you bother to remember them? Don't they crowd out useful information?"

Sidney looked straight ahead and daubed at his nose. "The reasons why I don't like to fly consume only one percent of my brain's volume," he said. "It's the reasons why I do it anyway that occupy the other ninety-nine."

"Don't," said Diana deliberately, "bring that up now. Not now. Don't."

"Wasn't going to," said Sidney.

The man in front of Diana leaned out of his seat and twisted his neck around. A headset was still in his ears.

"You were terrific! I loved it!" he shouted.

Diana flashed a brilliant smile and immediately withdrew it. "Thank you. That's sweet." Cretin, she thought.

"What?" yelled the man.

A stewardess, who had been observing, walked over alongside Diana and pointed politely to the man's ears, indicating the headset still in position. The man nodded and removed the phones. He turned back to Diana.

"I hope you win the Oscar!"

His voice was just as loud as before.

Diana nodded again, trying to keep a pleasant expression on her face. When the man turned around, she leaned over to Sidney. "Bizarre, isn't it? Eight years with the National Theater, two Pinter plays, nine Shakespeare, three Shaws, and I finally get nominated for a nauseating little comedy." With her chin, she indicated the man in front of her. "And there's my audience. People who shout whether their earphones are on or off. The tone-deaf cognoscenti of crappola."

Sidney reached down to the little table still folded out in front of him. He picked up a gin and tonic, now largely diluted by melted ice, and drained the glass. "This is the way things are in Hollywood," he said. "If you can't stand the heat, go live in Greenland. Did I ever tell you about the time I was stationed there, by the way?"

"Yes, and I don't want to hear it again."

"Thule Air Base."

"Don't want to hear."

"Ten thousand Yanks and me."

"Sidney—"

"In the dark for six bloody months."

Diana twisted her body away, but Sidney leaned over and spoke into her ear. "I loved it."

The *Fasten Your Seatbelt* sign came on with a

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little musical "ding." Outside, they could see the hideous ball of orange smog that hung ominously over a sprawling Los Angeles.

Sidney lit a cigarette. "Gorgeous color, the smog. I wonder if they sell it in bottles? It would make lovely gifts for back home." He exhaled some smoke.

"You shouldn't smoke," said Diana.

"Quite," said Sidney. "Only the other day I was reading a magazine where they showed pictures of smokers' lungs. Rather like rotten fruit, I'd say. But your concern is touching."

"It's not concern, darling," said Diana. "Although I am concerned. It's—"

A stewardess leaned over. She was blond and in her early twenties, and her orange lipstick was slightly smeared. "I'm sorry, Mr. Barrie, but the *No Smoking* sign is on."

Sidney raised his eyebrows. "Ah . . . of course. Yes. Sorry." He smiled and crushed out his cigarette. "I thought it was meant for the people on the ground."

The landing made Diana's ears clog even though she sucked ferociously on a Lifesaver and swallowed every ten seconds. Sidney sat immobile, and she knew that his ears must be stopped-up too. Sidney always seemed to have a slight cold or allergic reaction, and he claimed landings were not only uncomfortable, but painful. He said nothing, but once Diana saw him wince. She leaned back with relief, as much for him as for herself, when they finally touched down.

"Thank you for flying United," said the stewardess as they exited the plane.

Sidney smiled vacantly. "I know you're saying something wonderful, but I can't hear you. Goodbye."

Inside the terminal, a large crowd was waiting for the disembarking passengers. A black man dressed in torn chinos and an undershirt approached Diana.

"Ay, ain' you—"

"No."

"Wait a minute," said the man. "Wa-it one god-damn minute. Ain' ah seen you— Ain' you that—"

"I look like her," said Diana. "But I'm not. Not me."

The man shook his head uncertainly as a second fellow, rather nattily dressed, rushed up behind Sidney.

"Miss Barrie?" he asked loudly.

"No. *She* is," said Sidney.

"Bobby Dorso," said the second man. "With the agency?"

"Oh, yes, of course. How are you, Bobby?" Diana recalled once seeing him around the office of her agent, Ken Rawlings. Sucking up to the boss, if she remembered correctly. "It's nice to see you again. I didn't recognize you."

"It's a thrill to meet you, Miss Barrie."

Diana became conscious of people in the crowd, staring. Suddenly, on impulse, she grabbed the black man's arm. "You know my husband, Bobby, don't you? Sidney, this is Bobby. Bobby, Sid."

The black man seemed almost as startled as Bobby. "Shirley MacLaine, that's who," he said. "Ah knows 'em all."

Diana touched a hand to her chin in mock surprise. "Oh, wait. Oh, dear me. Seems as if I've selected the wrong one." She reached over to Sidney. "*This* is my husband Sidney. Yes, I'm certain of it now. This is the one."

Sidney smiled agreeably, and the three of them began to walk.

"So long, Miss MacLaine," yelled the black man.

"Good to be recognized," said Diana.

They headed toward the luggage area. "Did you

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have a nice flight?" asked Bobby Dorso as Sidney drew ahead.

"He can't hear you," said Diana. "His ears . . . from the plane."

"Oh," Bobby shrugged.

"As a matter of fact it was thirteen and a half hours of heaven," said Diana.

"Terrific. If you'll describe your luggage and give me your claim checks, I'll pick up your bags for you."

Abruptly, Sidney turned around. "Mine as well?"

"I thought you couldn't hear," said Bobby.

Outside the terminal, a large, chauffeur-driven Rolls-Royce idled at the curb.

"Right here, Miss Barrie," Bobby called, as Diana followed him through the terminal doors.

"Oh, Christ," said Diana. "The royal treatment. And if I lose, we go home in a station wagon."

The chauffeur held open the rear door as they all piled in.

"I can get used to this life very easily, darling," said Sidney. "Promise me you'll get nominated every year."

"Save your sarcasm for your friends," said Diana.

"Can't hear," said Sidney, capping his ear. He leaned back and glanced over at Bobby. Casual suit with vest, no tie, wire-framed glasses, mod hairdo. Sidney guessed an age: twenty-six. Another guess: divorced. Certainly unmarried. Sidney couldn't see it, but he knew there'd be a thin gold chain hanging around the neck, chest hairs carefully combed up to peek out the collar. One of your basic Hollywood types.

"Lovely weather for a drive," said Sidney, tapping Bobby on the knee.

Bobby smiled uncertainly. Ahead, a station wagon filled with people began to discharge steam from under the hood. Abruptly, it cut over into their lane, causing

the chauffeur to step hard on the brake, and Diana and Sidney to lurch forward.

"You okay, Miss Barrie?" asked Bobby quickly, when Diana sat back.

"Fine," said Diana.

Bobby smiled. After several seconds Sidney said, "I'm fine, too," but Bobby didn't acknowledge him.

"That's the kind of people they shouldn't let on the road," said the chauffeur. "I mean I'm a liberal, but somewhere you gotta draw the line. My line is people in wagons that overheat for no reason. Outside of that, I say 'Live and let live.' " He paused. "They looked like Spics, in addition."

2

The "Spics, in addition" were actually two black doctors and their wives, Doctor and Mrs. Willis Panama, and Doctor and Mrs. Chauncey Gump. They stood now at the side of the road, waiting in helpless fascination as their station wagon belched clouds of water vapor from several openings.

"Well, that's just fine," said Willis, hands on hips. "Terrific. Unless you're making a pot of tea, I think we're in trouble." His tone was accusatory.

Chauncey looked at him and smiled coldly. "I did not build the car. *I* did not design it, or even maintain it. *I* did not even want to rent it, if you recall." He paused, turned away, then suddenly whirled back. "I just drove it, that's all. Just drove it. *That* shouldn't be too much for a car."

"Car is like a human body," said Willis philosophically. "Gotta watch it, treat it correctly, observe it. Did you look at the gauge like I told you?"

Chauncey began to sway. A Cadillac zipped past them, dangerously close. "Move back!" yelled Chauncey. "Everyone move back!" They retreated behind the smoking wagon. "I looked at the gauge," he continued. "I looked at it more than I looked at the road. I went off the road, but I never went off the gauge."

Willis adjusted his spectacles. Like most doctors, he had little understanding or patience with mechanical devices. Like most doctors, he had come close to killing people in the operating room because of this. (Once, a pump used to circulate fluid in a wraparound blanket had failed during a heart operation. The patient had just about come out of hypothermia and was bleeding profusely, before a technician had saved the day by simply tightening a wire—while Willis looked on helplessly.) But next to Chauncey Gump, Willis Panama was Thomas Edison and the Wright brothers rolled into one skinny body. Chauncey didn't even know which end of a hammer was the handle. Chauncey could hardly turn off the water in the sink.

"If you would've looked at the gauge it wouldn't have overheated," said Willis stolidly.

Chauncey regarded him cynically. "You mean looking at a gauge *real good* stops it from overheating?"

Willis rolled his eyes. "No! You've got to speak up. You've got to yell, 'Hey, the gauge says we're overheating.' That's not the kind of news you keep to yourself."

Chauncey extended his neck and stroked his Adam's apple. It was a gesture that had always annoyed Willis, had annoyed him for twenty-two years. He felt it made Chauncey look like a chicken. Willis's wife came up behind him.

"I hate rented cars," she said. "Let's just leave it here. Can't we just leave it here?"

"And what?" said Chauncey. "Leave it here and what? Just abandon it? Forget about it?"

"I don't know," said Bettina. "Let the vultures eat it, I don't care."

Willis bent over the hood. The geysers of steam had stopped. Gingerly, he felt for the latch, found it, and pulled it forward. The hood popped up. He turned his head sideways to Chauncey. "Your malpractice insurance cover your driving?"

"Don't be wise," said Chauncey.

Willis fished a handkerchief from his pocket and very gingerly wiggled the radiator cap. Nothing. He carefully loosened it a quarter turn, felt a pressure, heard a "phhhtt" as a last, weak jet of steam forced its way out, and waited to see if anything else would happen.

"You see that?" said Chauncey, his voice rising to almost womanish pitch. "You a fool. You almos' got yourself killed!"

Willis chuckled, noting how Chauncey reverted back to dialect when he was excited. You could take the boy out of Brownsville, but you couldn't take the Brownsville out of the boy. Willis removed the cap completely and peered down into the mouth of the radiator.

"Water's down about four inches," he called. "But at least it's cooled off. I told you we just had to give it a chance. I'll close the hood and we'll go. It's only a short distance now. *I'll drive.*"

He walked over to the grass where he'd placed his suit jacket, and put the jacket back on. Bettina and Lola picked up their hand luggage and started back for the car. Willis turned just in time to hear Chauncey yell "Ahhh!" and see him leap backward about six feet, the radiator cap still in his hand.

"What—" Willis began.

"I was trying to replace it," said Chauncey, blowing on his outstretched palm.

Willis smiled. "Oh. I see. Mother's little helper, huh? But did Mother's little helper see me use a handkerchief when I held the cap? Did he?"

Chauncey tightened his lips and walked back to the car. Using his unburned hand, he slammed down the hood with great force. He looked defiantly at Willis.

"Very astute of you to realize," said Willis calmly, "that replacing the cap only permits pressure to build up. Even though the engine will now run hot, at least the radiator pressure will be down."

"What's the matter with the doors?" said Lola.

The men looked at her. She and Bettina tugged at the doors one after the other, but none would open. Chauncey tried also, but was equally unsuccessful. Willis stared at the sky.

"Forget it," he said. "Anti-theft interlock. You remember the man told us about it, *warned* us it was defective. Said *not* to slam the hood down. Didn't he specifically tell us that if you slammed the hood, the doors would most likely lock?"

"Did the man say my fingers would be on fire?" said Chauncey. "Or did he say what I thought I heard him say, that he was giving us a real creamball here, a honey. 'Our men of medicine deserve only the prizes' were his exact words, I believe. Crook!"

Bettina stood away from the car. "It's locked all right. Who's got the keys?"

Willis pursed his lips. "The car's got the keys, of course. You expected something else?"

"Why didn't you take the keys, dear?" said Lola to Chauncey.

"I only went from my seat to the hood. I thought it was safe. And by the way, if you're on *his* side, stand over there. I like to know whom I'm dealing with." Chauncey licked his seared palm.

Willis had accepted the situation. "I ever tell you about this patient of mine, burn victim, replaced a whole patch on his chest with skin from a pig? Came back about a year later, said he had uncontrollable urges to roll in the mud. And his wife kept complaining about his squealing." He grinned, but the others were unmoved.

"Disaster," said Chauncey, "and he tells jokes."

"Oh, don't overreact," said Willis. "You always overreact. You—"

"What fool closed the windows?" said Bettina suddenly.

Chauncey's eyes widened. He pointed an accusatory finger at Willis. "*That* fool! There's the fool that closed them! You wanted a fool, you got him. Even with my eyes on the gauge I saw him close the windows!"

"True?" said Bettina.

"The air conditioning doesn't work with open windows," said Willis plaintively. "It was a reasonable thing to do."

"Well now the *car* doesn't work with *closed* windows, does it, fool?" said Chauncey almost gleefully.

Willis frowned. Every two weeks or so, he felt like punching Chauncey in the mouth. The last time he'd had that feeling was two weeks ago. Chauncey was due. Chauncey needed a shut-up lesson. Willis took a step forward, but Lola jumped in front of him. She had her camera out, an Instamatic.

"Hey, come on, everyone!" Lola herded Willis, Chauncey, and Bettina toward the rear of the wagon. "Okay, smile. We're in Los Angeles! Everybody say shit."

The three of them bared their teeth while Lola lined up the shot.

We're not in Los Angeles, thought Willis, as the shutter clicked. We're stranded on a goddamn highway,

miles from anywhere, and we can't get into our own car. Another hour and they won't hold our hotel rooms. This isn't supposed to happen to people like us. We're professionals. He looked around dejectedly as the cars sped past.

3

The Rolls pulled slowly up the driveway and stopped in front of the main entrance.

"Beverly Hills Hotel," announced the chauffeur, as though he were a tour guide.

"I thought you told me we were staying at the Howard Johnson's near the airport," Sidney said to Diana. "You know I don't care for this place."

"My secretary tried to get us in there, dear," Diana said without blinking. "But they were booked. Sorry, love, maybe we can transfer in a few days."

Bobby looked puzzled. With movie stars it was hard to tell. Some were kidders, some quite crazy. He let one corner of his mouth flutter upward as the chauffeur came around to open the door. As the three of them got out of the car, a small group of photographers shouted instructions, and began to snap pictures.

"Turn your head, please, Miss Barrie!"

"Give us a smile, Miss Barrie!"

"Over here, Miss Barrie!"

They pushed their way through the crowd, Bobby in the lead.

"How did they know you would be here?" asked Sidney, quite amazed.

"They didn't know *I* would be here," said Diana, stopping to sign an autograph book proffered by two young boys. "It's Academy Week. And all the stars who visit stay at the Beverly Hills. The photographers just wait at the hotel." She turned to sign someone's laundry ticket.

"Good luck tonight, Miss Barrie," said one of the young boys.

"Everybody says you're going to win," said the other.

"Listen" said Diana, "I'm pleased just to be nominated."

"And I'm pleased to still have eardrums," said Sidney.

"Take your picture, Miss Barrie?" said a pre-teenage girl, emerging from the crowd with an ancient box camera.

Diana nodded and Sidney stood next to her.

"By yourself," said the girl, motioning Sidney to move away.

Sidney took a step to the side. "Well, I'm pleased again," he said to no one, as the girl pressed the shutter release. "Pleased just to be Mr. Barrie."

In the lobby of the hotel, Bobby advised them to sit while he took care of the checking in. He returned minutes later with a key. "Suite four one seven," he said. "Good rooms. Why don't you two go upstairs, and I'll have your luggage sent to you?"

"Seems sensible," said Sidney. "Although I usually carry my own luggage."

Bobby looked at him strangely. "Best of luck, Miss Barrie," he said abruptly. "Good seeing you."

"My pleasure entirely," said Diana.

"Hers entirely," mumbled Sidney, as Bobby walked off.

Diana and Sidney headed for the elevator.

"Why do you delight so in making people think you're strange?" she asked when they were alone, on the way up.

"Can't hear you," Sidney said, turning his head sideways. "Plane broke my ears."

In the bedroom, Diana unpacked. She knew exactly where everything was in every suitcase because she had put it there herself. Even when Sidney went off somewhere alone, Diana packed for him. It had been that way since they were married. He expected it, didn't question it. *Make him an infant and he'll stay an infant*, a psychologist had once told her. *Re-educate him. Doesn't matter how old he is, re-educate him.* She hadn't. Couldn't. She supposed that keeping him a child enabled her to exercise a tighter hold on him, reduced her own insecurities. Who knew? The shrinks, after all, could write books on why people picked their noses. Perhaps packing someone's suitcase wasn't really all that bad.

She looked around at the assortments of flowers and baskets of fruit arrayed about the room. For some reason she could not quite identify, it all struck her as rather sad—a middle-aged actress travels six thousand miles in the faint hope of receiving a small metal statue for a shallow, pointless comedy. She opened a drape, and a shaft of warm afternoon sunshine made a bright, cherry rectangle on the crimson carpet. For just a moment it reminded her of that time, so long ago, when she was a little girl living with her grandmother on Fulham Road. She'd had a tiny room in the attic, barely large enough

for a bed, and she'd amused herself for hours on end by blocking off portions of the small window in order to get different sun-shapes on the sheet.

Glancing now into the living room, Diana saw that Sidney was sunk in a velvet chair, mouth agape as he watched the television. Fatuous-looking, she thought. A grown man, sprawled before a picture box in the middle of the day.

The phone rang, and Sidney picked it up without taking his eyes off the screen.

"Hello?"

"Sidney?"

"Yes."

"Joe Pickman."

"Oh, yes," said Sidney. "How are you?"

"I'm fine," said Pickman. "The question is, how's our star?"

"Oh, I'm fine, too," said Sidney.

Pickman chuckled. "Good, good! And how's the woman behind the star?"

"Well, a bit nervous, I think."

"She's gonna win," said Pickman confidently.

"Do you really think she will?" asked Sidney. He actually had never considered the possibility. "Well, let's hope so." He remembered something. "Oh, and thank you for the flowers and the fruit and this lovely suite and everything else you send up by the hour."

"My pleasure," said Pickman.

"One moment, Joe, I'll let you speak to Diana," Sidney said.

He put a hand over the mouthpiece and called into the bedroom. "Di?"

"What?"

"It's Joe Pickman."

"Tell him I'm in the can."

"Di, the man paid for this trip, he paid for this

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suite, and he gave you the best part you've had in five years. I—"

"That was low, Sidney."

"I am not going to tell him you're in the can."

Diana rushed out of the bedroom. "Then *I'll* tell him." She snatched the receiver from Sidney. "Joe, darling. I told Sidney to tell you I was in the can."

"In the can?" said Pickman. "But why? In the first place, everyone knows that Academy Award-winning actresses don't go to the can. But why would you say that?"

"I didn't want to speak to you, that's why."

There was a knock on the door, and Sidney opened it. A waiter came in with a bottle of champagne and set it down on a table in a bowl of ice.

"Compliments of Mr. Pickman, sir. If you'll just sign here." The waiter held out a pad of receipts, and Sidney signed the top one.

"My first autograph today," he said.

The waiter opened the champagne, popping the cork into his palm, and set out two glasses. "Pour it for you, sir?"

"Thank you."

Sidney tipped the man two dollars on his way out, making a mental note to ask someone if that amount was appropriate.

"I don't understand why you don't want to speak to me," continued Pickman over the phone.

"Because I feel so responsible," said Diana. "I don't want to let you down tonight."

"Oh, don't be—"

"I know how much the film means to you, and I want so much to win this for you, Joe. There was no picture without you—"

"Oh, now, Diana . . ."

"Well goddammit, it's true. After four studios turned it down, you deserve some special perseverance award."

It *was* true. He had stuck with it, and personally, he was a nice guy. The shame was, thought Diana, that his perseverance hadn't been in the cause of something more worthy. Still . . .

"You're a chubby little man and I adore you," she said. "If I win tonight, darling, it's not going to be an Oscar. It's going to be a Joe Pickman. You're an angel."

She hung up.

Sidney handed her a glass of champagne. "That was very sweet."

"Did you like it?"

"It seemed sincere."

"It's going to be my acceptance speech," Diana said.

"Your acceptance speech?" Again, he thought: I wonder if she might really win.

"All except the part that I was in the can," Diana said. "Crappers aren't good for one's image."

"As long as you're ready," Sidney said.

"Naturally, you and I know that I don't have a chance in hell, but you've got to prepare *something*. You can't just stand there sobbing all over Burt Reynolds."

Sidney sat down again and resumed watching the TV. It was a *Star Trek* re-run.

"You have as good a chance as anyone," he said. On screen, Spock had been taken prisoner by a group of Klingons.

"I don't have the sentiment on my side," said Diana. "You've got to have a sentimental reason for them to vote for you."

Captain Kirk had ordered the *Enterprise* to travel at warp factor twelve, but Scotty, the Scottish engineer,

didn't know if the hull could withstand it. "I dinna think the hull can take it," he said.

"Any decent actress can give a good performance—Sidney, are you listening?"

"They're chasing the Klingons," he said. "But the ship's structure is in danger."

"But a dying husband would have insured everything."

Sidney looked up.

"You wouldn't like to get something fatal for me," continued Diana. "Would you, angel?"

"You should have told me sooner," said Sidney. "I could have come over on the *Hindenburg*."

Diana walked over to an end table where a basket of green and red grapes lay tilted slightly forward. She tore off a handful of the green ones, came back, and fed them into Sidney's mouth while standing behind him.

On-screen, Kirk had ordered Sulu to stop dead in space, hoping to deceive the Klingons into thinking they were helpless.

"We *are* terrible, Sidney, aren't we? God will punish us."

Sidney crushed a grape between his molars. "I think he already has. If not him, then the Klingons."

Diana kissed the top of his head. "Let's do something naughty. You always think of such good naughty things to do."

"Like that time in Prague with the waitress and the whipped cream?"

"Naw!" Diana guffawed. "Come on. Use your imagination."

Sidney's gaze stayed riveted to the screen. The Klingons had taken the bait and returned. The *Enterprise* was preparing its phaser banks to cripple the enemy. "I was naughty all day yesterday," he said.

"Not with me, you weren't," said Diana.

"Well," said Sidney, looking up and smiling his handsome, wicked smile. "You'll just have to learn to show up on time." He took her hand and kissed it.

She wondered if he really had done something shameful yesterday. She never really knew any more. She stared at him as his eyes drifted back to the television.

4

“Anyone have a hanger?” said Willis. “I might be able to open the door if I had a hanger.”

He remembered his childhood friends in the Bronx bending a stiff wire into the shape of a hook, then pushing it through the rubber molding at the side of a window and snaking it down over the door-lock button. Years later, he’d seen a medical technician use the same method to help a locked-out doctor in the parking lot at Bellevue.

“I think we might,” said Lola. She rummaged around in her hand luggage. “It was the luckiest thing. I just took this at the last minute—intuition, I guess—thought maybe I’d need it.” She produced a wooden hanger, held it triumphantly aloft.

“Shit,” said Willis.

“I’ll show you how we get in,” Chauncey said suddenly.

Willis looked around. Chauncey was hefting a grapefruit-sized rock. Before Willis could say anything, Chauncey had stepped toward the car and pounded the rock into the window on the driver's side. The window cracked all over, but did not break.

"What the—" said Willis. "Are you nuts? Are you insane? Look what you did! Who you think's gonna pay for that?"

Chauncey tilted his head and rammed the window again. This time shards of glass fell away, and a jagged hole opened up in the center. Another few poundings and the window had all but disappeared.

Willis stood gaping, unable to move.

Chauncey smiled casually, reached in, and opened the door. "Are we all ready to go?" he asked sweetly. He ushered Lola and Bettina into the car.

"I'm driving," said Willis, regaining his composure. "I don't trust anyone else."

"Fine," said Chauncey calmly, sliding next to Lola in the back seat. "But you'll have to get another physician to pick the glass out of your ass. I don't do that sort of work."

Willis scowled and gingerly removed the remains of the window from the upholstery. Minutes later, they were on the road.

"I'll tell you this," said Willis. "I'm not paying for the window. Bettina, you're keeping the books—put the window in *his* column."

Chauncey leaned forward. "We're driving, ain't we? We're not selling hot-steam-to-go by the side of the road, hah? We're not being towed, are we? Deduct the cost of being towed from *my* column."

Willis shook his head. It had seemed very reasonable when they'd started. He and Chauncey had both just completed a three-week advanced tissue pathology seminar at the University of Chicago. It had been a grueling

course, and they were both exhausted anyway after two years non-stop work without a vacation. It had been Bettina's idea to spend a few days in L.A., and Willis had quickly agreed. "Should we ask the Gumps?" he'd said, and Bettina had raised her eyebrows. "If you want to," she'd answered. "I'm sure the four of us would have fun. Built-in tennis doubles and all that. The only problem is they tend to really live it up, and I hate trying to keep pace with them. Lola has no concept of money whatsoever." Willis had shrugged. "I'll tell 'em straight out. We keep a separate record of all costs. He pays his, I pay mine. That way things stay in control. Might even help the guy to see what he spends. I mean, I don't think he's unreasonable."

Willis looked at Chauncey in the rear-view mirror, saw the muscles working under the high cheekbones. "You're completely unreasonable," he said. "You have the mind of a child."

"And you have the mind of an eggplant," said Chauncey.

Lola shook her head. "I can't believe this, I really can't. Two doctors, and look how they talk."

"This is the way we've always talked," said Willis.

"When are you two going to stop bickering and start vacationing?" said Lola. "Remember the vacation? It's been like this ever since we left Chicago."

"Uh, 'scuse me," said Bettina.

"What?" said Willis.

"I have an announcement."

"Here it comes," said Chauncey.

"I have to go to the bathroom. Can we pull off and find a gas station?"

"Oh, Jesus," said Chauncey. "Must it be right now? We just got started again. Is it pee-pee or doo-doo?"

"What, *doctor*?" said Bettina.

"Sissie or eh-eh, if you want to use technical terms. Oh, for God's—can you find some bushes?"

"No, I cannot find some *bushes*," said Bettina indignantly. "You're not talking to a poodle here." She turned. "Willis . . ."

"Okay, honey."

Willis looked over to his right to find a break in the traffic.

"What do you mean, 'Okay, honey'?" said Chauncey. "You're on a freeway, this is no time to 'Okay, honey'."

"When Lola wanted tacos, I heard enough 'Okay, honeys'," said Willis.

A large space developed between a Mercedes and a Buick up ahead. Willis craned his neck. "How am I on this side, honey?"

Bettina looked out of the window. "You're fine. Hurry up."

"He ain't fine if he has to hurry up," said Chauncey.

"Please watch what you're doing!" said Lola urgently.

"Now!" yelled Bettina. "Now! Go! No, wa—"

Willis swung the wagon over just as the Mercedes came up. It caught them on the corner of the rear bumper, knocking them forward just enough so that their front headlight could smash on the Buick just ahead. All three cars pulled over to the side.

"Whiplash!" yelled Chauncey. "Whiplash!" And then, to Willis, "Now we all got whiplash. *Okay, honey?*"

"Quiet, numbskull," said Willis. "Just keep your mouth shut. Say nothing. I'll handle this."

Willis got out of the car. From the Buick ahead, four people emerged—a man, a boy, a woman, and a girl. The driver of the Mercedes stood by his car, unmoving.

The four people walked toward Willis, all smiling. The man and boy wore leather shorts with suspenders, and complicated cameras were slung around their necks. The woman and girl had ruddy cheeks. The man extended a hand to Willis.

"Karl Machtinger," he said. "Ve are, you know, tourink here in America, yes?"

Willis smiled faintly.

"Very beautiful country you haf here, yes?"

Willis nodded.

"Too bad, ze accident, I sink."

"Ah, not that bad," said Willis.

The man looked briefly at the rear of his Buick. His cheeks were ruddy, like the women's. The boy began taking pictures with his camera. The man turned back to Willis.

"Iss nussing much, I sink."

"Good," said Willis.

"Four hundred dollars iss enough completely," said the man, holding out his hand.

"What?" said Willis. "Wait a minute. It doesn't work like that. Here—" He extracted his license and the rental registration from his wallet. "You copy this, I copy yours."

The man handed the documents to his wife, who immediately produced a pencil and paper from her purse and started writing.

"Listen, you," said the man, as his son put aside the camera. "You better pay up, you hear. You hit me, you pay."

"You don't understand," said Willis. He turned his head for a brief moment and saw Chauncey glaring after the Mercedes as it sped away.

"Oh, I understand," said the tourist heatedly, his red face seeming to swell and become a huge purple melon. "I understand how you Americans sink you can

take advantage of a foreigner, hah? Especially a Cherman foreigner, yes?"

"You're making a mistake," said Willis, but the man stepped forward and hit him a glancing, awkward blow alongside the shoulder. Willis, not hurt at all, looked at him in wonder. The son grabbed his father by the shoulders.

"I teach you a lesson, big mouth!" yelled the man. "You'll see, this isn't finished, vise guy! I teach you a lesson!"

The son hustled the father to the Buick as the woman handed Willis back his license and registration. "Very nice to haf met you, Herr Doctor Panama," she said politely.

And then she bowed her head politely while Willis stood there.

"Nice to have met you, too," said Willis after a while.

Willis looked anxiously in the rear-view mirror. "Is that them?" he asked. "I think that's them."

Chauncey twisted slowly around, then turned back. "It is not them," he intoned. "You have become paranoid."

"I am not paranoid," said Willis. "The man said very clearly that he was gonna get me. He said he would teach me a lesson."

"Maybe he's a piano instructor," said Chauncey jauntily. "Maybe he's offering you a free sample."

Willis studied the car in the mirror, tried to discern the driver. "Sure, laugh, Gump. Your friend is being trailed by a homicidal maniac, but you don't care. I mean the guy actually hit me. Hit me, after only two minutes!"

"That doesn't make him a maniac," said Chauncey. "Matter of fact, that probably shows he's rather normal."

Willis pressed his lips together.

"I still have to make," said Bettina.

"We're not getting off," said Willis tightly. "Next time we get outa this car is at the hotel. You just hold your tinkle, that's all."

The car behind had pulled into the left-hand lane and was gradually overtaking them. Willis could see four high-school-age boys inside. But the new car trailing them was clearly a Buick. . . .

"What'd you tell the guy in the Mercedes, anyway?" said Willis, after ten minutes. "I notice he took off in an awful hurry."

Chauncey smiled. "Oh, yeah, he was in a little rush. I told him we—me and you—was two players in from Chicago with our lead women."

"What?" said Lola. "You told him you were pimps?"

"Yeah, why not? I told him we were here to score some coke and that since none of us wanted any trouble, best thing everybody could do was just play it cool and split."

Willis guffawed. "And he believed you? You, a cocaine-dealing pimp?" He laughed again.

"Look," said Chauncey seriously. "A middle- or upper-class white man sees four black people in a car, driving erratically"—he checked Willis's face—"he's ready to believe anything. This guy swallowed it whole. Didn't even take my registration."

"But you didn't have one of those wide-brimmed hats or a fur coat," said Bettina.

"And you're not wearing four-inch stiletto heels and black mesh stockings," said Chauncey. "Although that's not such a bad idea. Anyway, I told him we were gonna watch him to see he didn't contact the cops. He just nodded, raised his hand, and said, 'Oh, no problem.' I thought I was gonna laugh out loud."

"Terrific," said Willis. "He's probably at the police station right now, giving our description. They'll bring us all in, do humiliating personal searches, and lock us up for intimidation or leaving the scene of an accident or some such thing. And we'll each get nice little hotel rooms seven feet by nine, with bunk beds and toilets. Clever strategy, Gump. And meanwhile, while you were playing Iceberg Slim, I'm up front dealing with Der Fuehrer."

"Oh, Willis," said Chauncey. "Come on now. You're taking this much too seriously. It was just an incident. Relax. Cool off. From here on, it's smooth sailing."

"Sailing makes me seasick," said Willis. He saw, in the mirror, that the Buick was gaining.

The Mercedes came squealing up the driveway and lurched to a halt in front of the hotel. The man who got out wore a Ralph Lauren orange sport shirt, a peach-colored cashmere sweater, brushed denim slacks, and a brand-new pair of tan goatskin Adidas sneakers. Polaroid sunglasses perched atop his head like a second pair of eyes. He brushed past two producers standing at the entrance.

"Hello, Charley," he said. "Whaddaya say, Herb?"

The taller one, gray-haired, with a pipe, said, "Billy boy! How's the new script coming?"

Bill winked. "I found all the words in the dictionary. I just have to put them together. How's the O'Neill?"

Charley Burke, he knew, had somehow acquired rights to *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, which he was planning to re-make as a musical comedy.

Burke shrugged. "Coming along, coming along. We got Farrah and we got Henry Winkler. The problem now is the damn writers. Isn't that something? Can't get a decent script. The last two guys took nearly three weeks

and handed in garbage." He was shaking his head as Bill entered the hotel.

Bill crossed the lobby to the house phone area and picked up a phone. "Mrs. Hannah Warren, please. Yes. This is Bill Warren."

He waited. A short, portly man at the next phone wiped his forehead with a handkerchief as he spoke in low, urgent tones. "I mean the prices out here are ridiculous! They're asking a million-two and it's only got one bedroom."

Hannah's voice came over the phone in Bill's hand. He shivered slightly as he caught the first crisp words.

"Bill? Where are you?"

"I'm right downstairs. Lobby."

"Here? Well, come on up. Room three oh six."

She hung up.

Bill pictured her in his mind's eye the pouty O-shaped lips, olive skin, lithe figure, diamond-hard ass. Even her smells began to come back—wasn't it Henry Miller who said that those remain forever?—the heated, musky, animal odors, the feverish oozings of the rain forest, the lush tropical outpourings of a woman in heat. Nine years, it had been. Nine years, and he still remembered. He headed for the elevators.

"I'll offer them a million even," said the man at the next phone. "Maybe we can partition the living room."

5

There was a knock on the door just as Hannah put down the phone. For an instant, she had the crazy notion that it was Bill, that somehow he hadn't been in the lobby at all, but had been right next door all the time. She sidestepped the chambermaid who was busily making the bed, avoided the two packed valises on the carpet, walked to the door, and opened it. A waiter stood there with a tray on which were a glass and a cup.

"Put it there, please," said Hannah, indicating a table in one corner.

The waiter entered, placed the tray carefully down, then took out a bill and offered it to Hannah with a small pencil. "One double Scotch and one tea with lemon."

Hannah examined the pencil. "This the longest the hotel can afford?"

"It writes," said the waiter.

"So does a piece of charcoal," said Hannah. She

glanced down at the bill. "Six dollars and ninety-five cents?"

The waiter, a teenager, looked straight ahead. "Yes, ma'am."

"Would it be possible just to *rent* a couple of drinks?"

The corners of the boy's mouth fluttered upward briefly. He glanced at Hannah, seeming actually to see her for the first time. "Ma'am?"

Feigning ingenuousness, thought Hannah. She looked at his arms, the muscles bulging against the waiter's jacket. His face was smooth, the barest trace of a beard outlining his chin. Hannah had a fleeting image of herself in a slip, rubbing her body against the boy's firm torso. She inhaled. Christ! She was old enough to be his mother.

"Thank you very much," she said.

The waiter nodded and walked to the door.

"Can you take this with you?" asked Hannah, pointing to the cart with the remains of her breakfast.

"Sure," said the boy, and pushed it slowly out of the room.

Hannah lit a cigarette. She felt the first twinges of melancholia coming on, the advance guard of self-pity, and quickly suppressed them. She'd had experience; all you needed was to let those feelings gain a beachhead and it was goodbye the rest of the day. She'd lost too many days to depression. She gave a little head toss—amazing how a physical manifestation can mirror an inward decision—and was about to close the door when a hand reached in and held it open.

"Hello, Hannah."

She steeled herself against the voice, as she had steeled herself against it over the phone. "You were supposed to knock. I was going to keep you standing in the hall. You screwed up my big moment."

"You still can do it," said Bill.

Hannah didn't answer, but backed up into the room instead. Bill followed, closing the door.

"How are you?" he said.

Hannah looked him carefully up and down—an appraisal, an assessment of a piece of goods. "Well," she said, "at this moment I'm nonplussed. What the hell have you done to yourself? You've turned into a young boy again."

Carefully, Bill ignored the comment. It wouldn't help, he thought, but why give Hannah something extra to push against? Pushing was what she was prepared to do, pushing and shoving; she wanted action. She looked well, a bit leaner than he remembered, her face slightly harder, but still mightily attractive. Still that charged-up sense of energy, of explosive need. He caught a perfumy fragrance that seemed to come from her hair. See, he thought, there it is again. The aromas of another time, olfactory history.

"It's good to see you," he said.

"I mean it," said Hannah, staring at him.

His good looks had, in fact, startled her. Why hadn't he *aged*, the bastard? Why wasn't life *getting* to him, wearing him down, grinding him, as it was everyone else? Christ, he looked wonderful, better than ever, as teenage as the goddam waiter. The women must be opening their legs for him by the thousands. Armies of spread-eagled females.

"You look like the sweetest young fourteen-year-old boy," she said. "You're not spending your summers at camp, are you?"

"Just three weeks in July," said Bill. He watched as the chambermaid gave a final flurry with the bedspread, tucked it in, patted it, and then went out the door. "Shouldn't we kiss or shake hands or something?" he said.

"Let's save it for when you leave," said Hannah.

"I made a one-thirty reservation for lunch. Is that all right?"

"Give me a minute," said Hannah. "When you haven't seen your ex-husband in nine years, your eyes have to adjust."

He stood there awkwardly as she continued to examine him. She puffed her cigarette ferociously.

"I love your California clothes," she said.

"They're from New York, I was East two months ago to research some locations. I stopped in Bloomingdale's."

"The best place for California clothes. You look so—I don't know—what's the word I'm looking for?"

"Tessellated?"

"What does that mean?" she said.

"Checkered."

Hannah's lips pressed together.

She never did have a real sense of humor, thought Bill. Only a kind of Bob Hope ability to trade one-liners.

"Happy?" he said.

She shook her head. "Casual," she said at last, mildly irritated that he didn't seem to be taking her seriously. "It's so hard to tell out here. Are you dressed up now, or is that sporty?"

"I didn't think a tie was necessary for a reunion."

"Is that what this is? When you walked in like that, I thought we were going to play tennis."

Bill shrugged. "Well, you certainly look fit enough for it."

Hannah's face hardened. "Fit? You think I look fit?" She stared up at the ceiling, then back at him. "What an awful shit you are. I look gorgeous."

Bill grinned. "Yes, you do, Hannah."

"Your tan, of course, is perfect. I always wondered how you got the back of your ears so dark."

"You put the top of your car down and drive away from the sun."

He was beginning to feel the slightest bit dizzy. He felt very much like leaving, getting out of the room. The air was poison here, venomous.

"They say too much sun gives you cancer," said Hannah. "You want melanomas on the skin?"

"I'll take the fruit cocktail instead," said Bill. "Besides it's not the sun gives people cancer, it's the bathing suits." He took a deep breath. "Listen, Hannah, if we're going to banter like this, give me a little time. After nine years, I'm a bit rusty."

Hannah moved toward the window. "Oh, you'll pick it right up again. It's like French." She looked out, but her eyes remained unfocused. "You see, that's what I would miss if I left New York. The bantering."

"We banter here in California," said Bill defensively.

"No," said Hannah. "You don't. You have chit-chats. Powwows. Telecons. But you don't have real conversations, and you don't banter. Too casual to banter. Too tropical, down-cool easygoing for that."

"San Francisco's only an hour away," said Bill. He sat on the edge of the bed. "We go up there to banter in emergencies."

"Never liked San Francisco," said Hannah, frowning.

Bill studied her face. Still the soft, doe eyes, the adorable dimpled chin. Nature certainly was a fooler.

"I was always afraid," continued Hannah, "that I'd fall out of bed and roll down one of those hills."

"Not you, Hannah. You roll *up* hills."

Hannah smiled. "Oh, good. The flight wasn't a total loss. You're bantering."

"You make it sound like urinating."

"Similar. Some people, after a while, find it hard to keep up a good steady stream."

Bill raised his eyebrows. "Ah, so . . . Getting biological, are we? I detect a bit of snip in the air. I take it your talk with Jenny didn't go too well."

It was her turn to shrug. "Oh, I don't know. I thought we glared at each other very nicely."

She walked over to the table where the cup of hot water was steaming and the glass of Scotch was being diluted by melting ice. She dipped the teabag in the cup and draped the string over the edge. "I ordered a drink before lunch. I thought one of us might be a little nervous."

"And one a little ill and needing tea?"

She didn't answer.

"I gave up double Scotches on the rocks six years ago," said Bill. "I'm big on apple juice these days."

"Then I'm the one who's nervous," said Hannah, her voice strained. She picked up the Scotch and drained half of it. Too easily, thought Bill. It had been done with a smoothness that could have been acquired only by practice.

"Well," continued Hannah, looking up brightly. "It's obvious this place agrees with you, Bill. Or do they call you Billy now?" She nodded, raised and lowered her eyebrows. "Yes, they do. Jenny told me. Everybody calls you Billy."

"That's me," said Bill good naturedly. "Billy." He stood up.

"It's adorable," said Hannah, tilting her head. "Absolutely precious. A forty-five-year-old Billy. Standing there in his cute little sneakers and sweater."

"The President's brother happens to be named Billy," he said, knowing this was the wrong point to make. "The President himself is called Jimmy. They do all right."

Hannah simply ignored him. "Please sit down, Billy. I'm beginning to feel like your math teacher."

Bill glared at her. It would be awfully easy just to say *To hell with you, you bitch*, and storm out of the room.

Highly tempting. But that, of course, was what she was angling for.

"I promised myself, driving over here, that I would be pleasant," he said. "I am now being pleasant."

Hannah pursed her lips and formed them into that puckered circle that years ago he had found irresistible. "You drive everywhere, do you?"

"Yes, I drive everywhere, do I."

"Even to your car?"

Bill looked at her coldly. "If we're going, I think we'd better get started."

Hannah flashed a mirthless grin. "You've changed, Billy. You don't get rattled as easily as you used to."

"Maturity," said Bill. "Also, they don't have as many rattlers out here."

He walked to the door, opened it, made a little bow, and followed this with a sweeping flourish of his right hand. "After you, madame."

She looked at him, grinned, and walked out. "Maybe," she said in the hotel corridor, "this lunch won't be as dull as I thought."

In the elevator, a stocky man with a bull neck and floral print shirt tapped Bill on the shoulder. "Picture this for a TV movie," he said. He formed his fingers into a rough rectangle. "A young guy comes back from Vietnam. He's disillusioned, and his mind is all messed up, and in addition, he's on drugs. He wants—"

"I'm sorry," said Bill, "but I think—"

"Just hear me out," said the stocky man, his neck muscles rippling. "He wants to get into med school in Indiana, and he almost makes it, except he's closed out because they let the minorities in ahead of him." His face began to redden. "So instead he comes to Hollywood, see, because he always figured he could write and direct pictures better than anyone they got now, maybe even act, but—"

"I'm not a producer," said Bill. "I can't—"

"Hear me out!" shouted the man, his eyes wild. And then, a bit more calmly, "This is a good story, people will like it." He put up a palm. "So the guy goes around to agents and producers and producers' assistants, but no one will even talk to him, see, even *begin* to listen, so. . . ."

Bill caught sight of Hannah, staring in fascination.

". . . finally, he goes crazy, gets a gun, you know, and grabs a group of people and"—the man cocked his head, as if thinking—"he holds them hostage on an elevator." The man grinned wetly and reached for something inside his shirt.

Bill nodded slowly as the elevator passed the second floor. "I like it," he said. "I don't know if I can get it on, but it certainly has something." He could feel the droplets of perspiration on his forehead. "How about John Ritter for the boy?" He glanced quickly at Hannah, then turned back.

"Pacino," said the man, his hand still in his shirt.

"I don't think Pacino does TV movies," said Bill.

"I want Pacino!" The man's face contorted.

"Well, maybe if he really liked the script. . . ."

They reached the ground floor. Bill looked at the man, then slowly, carefully, ushered Hannah out ahead of him. He could sense the man walking just behind him. Something hard pressed against his back. Sickened, he turned. It was a rolled-up sheaf of papers.

"First draft of the script," said the man. "Name and address is on it. Let me know how you react."

Hesitantly, Bill took the roll of papers.

The man smiled, backing away. "What'dya think, the guy was me? Hah? Nah! I was never in Nam. I work at New-You Hair Design. Ask for Mr. Charles." He waved, and hurried off.

Bill puffed his cheeks and exhaled. "Jesus!" He

flipped the papers into a lobby waste basket. "This has been some day. Hasn't even started yet, and I've been threatened twice already."

"Twice?" said Hannah as they started across the lobby.

"Yeah. Unbelievable. On my way here, driving, a station wagon cuts me off, clips my right headlight, dents the grill. We both pull over, and out comes two black pimps. Yeah, they told me—why are you smiling?—and I could see the girls in the car. The one pimp talks to a guy in the Buick ahead, who they also managed to hit, and the other tells me that they're running cocaine and if I report the accident, they'll get me. He said they were gonna watch and see what I did."

"You didn't believe him, did you?" asked Hannah.

They went through the hotel doors, and Bill handed his parking slip to a car hop.

Bill shrugged. "Look, you don't know. You can never be sure whom you're dealing with. I mean, take that guy in the elevator. It's your life you're talking about." He craned his neck to see if he could spot his car.

"Don't tell me," said Hannah. "Let me guess. You have a Mercedes, right?"

"Right."

"The four-fifty SL?"

"Right again."

The Mercedes drove up. Bill handed the boy a dollar as he held the door open for Hannah.

"You have no class, Bill. You never did have class. A red Pinto in Beverly Hills would be class."

"I have one at home," said Bill. "That's how I get to the Mercedes."

He looked at her carefully as he closed the door, walked around to the other side of the car, and slid in. Despite what had happened to him in the morning, he

knew he was in for an even rougher afternoon. Regardless of what he'd told Hannah, he really did believe that the morning business was over. He headed down the driveway. And was quite surprised to see, passing him from the opposite direction, the familiar carload of drug-running pimps and hookers.

6

The boy who took the wagon scowled.

"Kid threw a rock," Willis called back as he, Bettina, Chauncey, and Lola stepped into the lobby. The cool, air-conditioned atmosphere was a welcome relief from the midday heat outside.

"At least we're here," said Lola. "For a while, I thought we'd never be home free."

They strode to the reservations desk. A clerk greeted them. "Help you folks?"

"We have reservations," said Chauncey.

"But we came here anyway," joked Willis.

The clerk pressed his lips together. "Name?"

"The reservations are in the name of Dr. Panama, but there should be two rooms. Two separate rooms."

"Separate as possible," said Chauncey.

The clerk went to a file to check. He returned holding a pink slip. "All I have in that name is one room."

"What?" said Willis. "What do you mean, just one room? We have two reservations. Doctor and Mrs. Willis Panama and Doctor and Mrs. Chauncey Gump."

The clerk stared down at the slip. "I have here one deluxe room, double bed, for Doctor and Mrs. Panama. Dates are from the eighteenth to the twentieth." He paused. "I have nothing for a Doctor Gump."

Chauncey stepped up to the desk. Willis could see the tiny muscles near his temple rippling spasmodically.

"Hold on," said Chauncey. "Just hold on. There's either some clerical error or an omission of intelligence."

"These are double-checked," bristled the clerk.

"Look, I don't care if Stanford University made a four-year graduate course out of them," said Chauncey. "This was set up weeks ago. My travel agent made all the reservations. He's my wife's brother and he's my patient. Now why don't you check *that* out?"

The clerk flashed a vulpine grin. From under the pink slip, he produced a smaller, light-blue piece of paper. "I already did. Here's the wire we received. You can see for yourself."

Chauncey took the paper and scanned it quickly while Willis looked over his shoulder. Their faces fell.

"Sic transit gloria mundi," said the clerk.

"Yes," said Chauncey. "All right, philosopher, I can see that my name is missing from the wire—"

"Perhaps your brother-in-law was unhappy with your services."

"Perhaps the mole I removed from his neck was actually a part of his brain," said Chauncey. "At any rate you can see that I'm not missing from the hotel."

"Quite."

"There's four of us. We need two rooms."

"I'm sorry," said the clerk. "It grieves me to say that we don't have two rooms available."

"You don't look very grieved," said Willis. "How

come, in this whole big hotel, there isn't one extra room? That doesn't sound reasonable."

"It's Academy Award week," said the clerk.

"We don't care who wins," said Willis. "We just want to get into bed."

The clerk smoothed down his hair. "We've been booked for months in advance."

"I'd like to see the manager," said Willis.

"Manager's out," said the clerk, smiling.

"When will he be back?"

"Day after tomorrow. Went down to Tijuana with a group from est. Supposed to attend a lecture there by an expert primal screamer."

Willis looked at the clerk carefully. "If, somehow, you could manage to find something, we . . . uh . . . would be sure to express our gratitude in concrete form. You understand that, of course."

"Let me check the charts," said the clerk quickly. From under the desk, he withdrew a bundle of computer forms and thumbed through them rapidly. Coming to a particular page, he looked up. "I do have a personal maid's room that's not being used."

"A maid's room?" echoed Chauncey unhappily.

"There is some slight repair going on there," elaborated the clerk. "It's a small single, not terribly comfortable, but I think I could squeeze a daybed in."

"You doin' the squeezin' yourself?" said Willis.

The clerk put the computer forms back under the desk, then folded his arms. "It's the best I can do." The phone rang. "Excuse me," he said.

Willis motioned for the others to follow him for a small conference. He heard the clerk say in low, strained tones into the phone, "I can't. Impossible. I can't now. Brad, I simply can't." The clerk looked up, and Willis turned away, but kept listening.

"It's all over for us," continued the clerk. "I don't

care. I'm rooming with Victor now, and I see the difference. Wha—? Same to you!" He slammed down the phone and saw Willis and the others watching him in silence. He scratched his ear. "Uh, that was Maintenance," he said. "Work on that room should be finished real soon."

Willis walked several paces away and the group followed. "Maintenance, my ass," he said.

"Not yours," said Chauncey.

"All right, what do we do?"

"Well, we can't stand here with whiplash and argue with the man. Let's go to the Hilton."

Willis shook his head. "Gee, we've only got a couple of days of vacation. I hate for us not to be together."

"What do you mean, 'not be together'?" said Chauncey. "We're all leaving, ain't we?"

Willis raised his eyebrows. "Well . . . they do have a reservation for two of us."

Chauncey looked at him. "You think we should stay here after the way they're treating us?"

"They're treating me and Bettina okay," said Willis glibly.

"I really had my heart set on the Beverly Hills," said Bettina. "It's so pretty here."

"But the problem," said Chauncey, "is that—"

"Oh, listen," said Lola, "even if it is a tiny room, in this place it couldn't be too bad. And besides, it's only for two nights."

Chauncey sighed and fished a nickel from his pocket. "Okay, we'll toss to see who gets the small room."

Willis held up a hand. "Why? I already have my reservation."

Chauncey began shaking his head. "You're *not* thinking what I hope you're not thinking, are you?"

Willis shrugged. "I'm thinking that *I* didn't make the reservations. I'm thinking that *I* didn't remove any

moles from my brother-in-law. And I'm thinking that there's no reason therefore why *we* should suffer because said brother-in-law is now an idiot. That's what's going through *my* mind."

Chauncey was shaking with anger. Desperately, he fought to control it. "Now wait a minute. I see enough blood in the hospital. I don't want to see any in a hotel lobby. Either we toss for the room—or you run for your life."

Willis stared at him fearlessly. "That'll make two threats today. First the Nazi in the Buick, now the butcher in the lobby. Well, I'm not running anywhere except up to my registered room and my reserved bath." He took Bettina's hand. "Come on, Honey."

Willis and Bettina crossed back to the desk. "We'll take our room," said Willis.

The clerk nodded. "What about them?" he asked, motioning toward Chauncey and Lola.

"They're still deciding," said Willis.

He signed the forms.

"I'll get you a bellhop," said the clerk, ringing a bell. He turned back to Willis. "Uh, you said there'd be something concrete, sir. . . ?" He smiled pleasantly.

"Oh, right," said Willis. "Excuse me one moment."

He crossed the lobby and went out the front entrance. Outside, in a corner of the parking lot, he found what he wanted, a chipped piece of sidewalk, which he placed in his pocket. Back at the front desk, he laid it in front of the clerk. "Willis Panama never goes back on a promise," he said jauntily.

Three yards away, Chauncey and Lola still spoke in guarded tones. "What time is it?" said Chauncey.

"What?"

"Time, time. I want to hear what time it is."

Lola looked at her watch. "A quarter to one."

"Remember it," said Chauncey. "Because that's exactly when you and I declared war!"

They crossed to the desk to register, just as Willis and Bettina entered an elevator. Outside, a carful of ruddy-faced German tourists pulled slowly into the driveway.

Top down, they headed toward Malibu, the wind massaging their faces and stroking their hair. The Mercedes hummed smoothly as Bill took it past sixty miles an hour.

"Is this too breezy for you?" he asked.

Hannah grinned. "I love it. I was always crazy about the smell of overripe cantaloupe."

"You get used to it," said Bill. "Like the odor of uncollected city garbage."

"Ah, yes, it comes. Can't suppress the old West Coast chauvinism for very long, can we? Once again, the decadent, dilapidated, burned-out East versus the modern Nirvana of California."

"I don't feel that way," he said. "And besides, you started."

Bill increased his speed to sixty-five. He remembered when they'd first met—she a New York born journalism major at USC, top ten percent of her class; he a major in nothing at Occidental College, a course-taker, barely *in* the class. He'd had a '54 Chrysler, a huge bomb that was falling apart but could still move, and even then she'd loved fast rides, had never been afraid. They'd gone together for three years and she'd graduated pregnant; two months later she'd miscarried, and three months after that she was pregnant again.

"Jenny tells me you moved. You're not in Hardy Canyon anymore."

"Laurel," said Bill. "Laurel Canyon."

"Laurel, Hardy, what the hell," said Hannah. "She tells me it's sort of a small French farmhouse with a little

watermill in the back and the sweetest little tennis court."

"That's right. And it only cost about half the gross national product." He shrugged. "Place to sack out."

"Sounds awfully rugged."

"Well, we're from pioneer stock out in the West."

"Oh, I'm sure," said Hannah. "Your ancestors probably had kidney-shaped log cabins to go with their pools. Did you ever think about that, by the way?"

"About what?"

"I mean, why the kidney shapes. Why not model pools after some other organ, like the pancreas, or the gall bladder? How about a thyroid-shaped pool?"

"Well," said Bill, "I certainly know how yours would look."

"Yes?"

"Spleen-shaped."

"Ah. Good. And yours, of course, would have the form—"

Bill held up a hand. "I know, I know. Of an asshole. Listen, there's a glass house about two blocks from here in case you want to throw a few more stones."

Hannah frowned. "Maybe I'll drop something from the plane when I leave tonight with Jenny."

Bill looked at her coldly, then switched on the radio.

". . . widespread power failures. The current ice storm now raging throughout the Northeast is expected to continue right through Sunday, with governors of Connecticut, New York, and New Jersey already declaring their states disaster areas. In other developments, the wild-cat transit worker walkout in New York City has now spread—"

Bill changed the station to music. A surfer group was singing about the problem of finding the perfect wave. Hannah smiled.

The parking lot at the Malibu pier was only one-third full. Bill eased the Mercedes into a spot. The heady, salt smell of the ocean filled his nostrils. They got out of the car. Bill had started around to unlock Hannah's door, but she had opened it herself before he'd taken two steps. Some things, he thought, never change.

"This looks very familiar," said Hannah.

Bill nodded. "It should. The house we rented the summer before Jenny was born is right down the beach there."

They walked side by side.

Hannah looked up at him. "That wasn't a bad summer, was it?" she said.

Her arms and shoulders seemed very thin. He had a sudden urge to hold her, clasp her to him, but, of course, he did nothing. "I thought it was terrific," he said softly.

"Yes," said Hannah. "Well, the Pacific Ocean was a lot more interesting in those days."

"You always loved the water, the beach."

Hannah shrugged. "You learn to live without."

They had moved to New York three years after Jenny's birth. One of Hannah's former professors had become an editor at *Newsweek* magazine; he needed an assistant, and remembered her. Bill had just been laid off from his job in the mail room at Paramount. They went, driving cross-country, the ancient Chrysler finally dying on the trip.

They ate in a small Italian restaurant, right on the beach. From their table they could see, and hear, the waves crashing against the shore. Bill ordered the veal piccata and a glass of apple juice; Hannah had antipasto and a glass of white wine. She lit a cigarette.

"You don't smoke, either?" she said.

"I gave them up eight years ago."

"Don't you miss the coughing and the hacking in the morning?"

An image flashed in Bill's mind: the two of them, students, making out in the car, his hands all over her, inside her, and she, even in passion, coughing away. Later, the aroma of her on his fingers, mixed with smoke.

"It woke the dogs up," he said. "I have dogs now."

Hannah's eyes widened. "Isn't divorce wonderful! You *have* changed, Billy. You've gone clean on me. Tell me what else you do to keep that winsome, adolescent look."

Bill looked at her sadly. "You're dying to make a little fun of me, aren't you?"

"Not at all."

"Go ahead, I don't mind. I have an hour to kill."

"Why kill it? Let's just beat it within an inch of its life."

Their eyes met, locked.

"Go ahead," said Bill.

"Nowhere to go."

"Ah! You need ammunition. Sorry, I forgot. Here: would you believe I run five miles every morning?"

"After what?"

"After a good night's sleep. I don't have a single pill in the medicine cabinet. And I even gave up analysis."

Hannah tilted her head. "Yes, I heard that. Why did you quit?"

Bill smiled. He'd been in analysis for six years, five of them with a Doctor Hoffman. Five years, three times a week, forty-five dollars an hour. Hoffman was a rotund, otiose fellow who, between sucks on his pipe, would tell Bill either that he wasn't being honest with himself or that he wasn't being fair to himself. Sometimes, on bad days, he'd claim Bill was being both dishonest and unfair simultaneously. "The first step," he'd say, "is to recognize that you're a failure at interpersonal relations."

"I don't think that's completely true," Bill would object.

"You see?" Hoffman would say. "Now you're not being honest with yourself."

Although he had a clock on his desk that clicked loudly, Hoffman was quite reasonable about the time, never terminating the sessions abruptly the way some psychologists did, and often giving Bill as much as five minutes extra. At the beginning, the therapy seemed to do some good, helped Bill cope with his divorce, the aimless, lonely drift of his life, seemed to give him a purpose. For a while, he nearly struck up a relationship with the patient who had the hour before him, a shy girl who wore off-the-shoulder dresses and had heartbreaking gray eyes. He terminated the friendship suddenly, however, when once, arriving early for a session, he'd heard her scream from the inner office, "You think it's fun having half your body turn to metal? You think it's easy? Even my hemorrhoids are solid steel!"

"I don't think you're being fair to yourself," had come Hoffman's door-muffled retort.

After the third year, Bill had reached a plateau. When he proposed various things he could do with his life, Hoffman seemed unenthusiastic about any of them, saying, "That's obsessive-compulsive," or "That puts you back on square one." After a great deal of questioning and give-and-take, Bill had finally ferreted out what it was that Hoffman considered the optimum, reasonable existence: it was to be a psychologist.

With Hoffman's consent, Bill transferred to a group. There was a fifty-year-old man who felt useless, a thirty-year-old man who still lived with his mother, a forty-year-old woman who felt unloved and unappreciated, and a forty-three-year-old woman who looked for sex outside the home but felt ashamed and regretful afterward. Bill solved half her problem and almost solved the other half, but later on she told the group that she felt disgusted with herself for not even feeling guilty.

"I think you're back to square one," Bill told her, and quit for good the next day.

"I quit because I went sane," he said now to Hannah.

"Sane!" said Hannah. "Sounds awfully boring. Depressing, in fact. Don't you ever get depressed, Billy?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"Now."

Hannah smiled. "Thank God the sun hasn't completely dried up your brain."

"Speaking of brain damage," said Bill, "how is life over the subway?"

"Fine. I still live in our old apartment."

"Really? Amazing. Your endurance is astounding. Does the Harper Management Corporation still send you a note every month raising your rent twenty dollars and telling you there'll be no hot water for two weeks so they can replace the present boiler with a smaller one? Does Con Edison still send you electric bills that exceed your annual income? Have you added any more locks to the doors, or do the burglars steal those too now?"

"I see you still have fond memories of the place. Course, you would hate it now."

"Why?" said Bill. "What did you do to it?"

Hannah sipped her wine. "Not a thing."

"Heard you went in for an operation," said Bill.

"Hysterectomy," said Hannah. "It was nothing. I have them every year."

She'd wanted to die. In some ways it was worse than death. The physical pain, the hospitalization, had been bad enough. The thought was worse: she was no longer a woman, but a sexless piece of meat. Brutalized by man, abandoned by nature, she was unable to reproduce her species. Gutted, like an animal. Savaged by scalpels,

a hollow husk, what else was left but to die? She'd recovered.

"And I believe you had prostate trouble," she said.

"Small world, eh?" said Bill. "I guess it wasn't getting enough exercise. Oh, by the way, if you ever need a good cystoscope, I can recommend someone. Dr. Jerry Finklestein, 'Urologist to the Stars,' he calls himself. He told me he once did James Dean."

"Guess our past sins have a way of catching up with us."

"Jenny tells me you have a new boyfriend."

Hannah chuckled. "No, no. A lover. *Jenny* has boyfriends."

"A writer, I'm told," said Bill. "Don't you think it's time for a change of profession? Something more stable, say, like an engineer, or accountant? Or is it that living with instability and imminent disaster holds some special appeal for you?"

"He happens to be with the *Washington Post*, and he's been there for thirty years," said Hannah. "I'd hardly call that instability."

"No, no, quite right," said Bill. "Sounds more like paralysis. Or catalepsy. What is he, a hundred and three?"

"He happens to be fifty-four," said Hannah, "and if you're interested in affairs of the clinic he has a heart condition, asthma, and leans toward alcoholism."

"I knew the imminent disaster couldn't be altogether out of the picture."

"He also has the second best mind I've met in this country since Adlai Stevenson."

"Yes, but apparently in the third worst body since Tiny Tim."

He was sorry as soon as he said it. Damn, why must he always sink to her level, why did she retain that power over him?

"And what's with you?" she said. "Mate-wise, I mean."

"Mate-wise? Mate-wise I'm seeing a very nice girl."

Hannah arched her eyebrows.

L'arc de triomphe, thought Bill. Evidence that the catty, the trivial, the sniping, snide, sarcastic, witless self had finally been evoked.

"Are you?" said Hannah. "And where are you seeing her to?"

Bill brought his fist crashing down on the table. "Dammit! Can't we say two straight words to each other? Nine years, and we can't say two straight words!"

Several people at the next table turned to look. Bill, who'd stood up, sat back down, embarrassed. Hannah seemed unperturbed, perhaps even faintly amused. But that, reflected Bill, was how she always appeared. She'd probably die that way, he thought grimly. He raised his hand to signal for the check.

Back outside, in the parking lot, Hannah was more subdued. "I'm sorry. Have I offended you, Bill?"

Bill shrugged. Ten years before he'd have retreated into a sullen shell, probably not have spoken for days. "My God, it's been a long time since I've been involved in smart-ass conversation."

"I beg your pardon," said Hannah, "but you were the one who said things like, 'I hear you have a boyfriend,' and 'I'm seeing a very nice girl.' I'm not the one with the Bobbsey Twin haircut and the Peter Pan phraseology."

"Sorry," said Bill. "Sorry my conversation doesn't fit your unique specifications of two parts vinegar, two parts lemon, and three parts alcohol. Why don't you just grade each of my words as it comes out, and the ones that don't pass I'll try to swallow back."

"You'd choke," said Hannah quietly.

The sun beat down strongly now, softening the

blacktop underfoot. Hannah wondered vaguely if she might actually get a burn. A tan, even. Wouldn't that be ironic?

"I see you've really come to hunt bear, haven't you?" said Bill.

"Hunt bear? Is that what you said? Hunt bear. I can't believe it. Is that the kind of nifty conversation you have around campfires out here in the rugged West?"

Bill ignored her. "Can we talk about Jenny?"

"What's your rush? She's only seventeen. She's got her whole life ahead of her. If I'm going to turn my daughter over to you—which I am not—at least I'd like to know what you're like."

"We were married for eight years," said Bill. "You still don't know what I'm like?"

"That was nine years ago," said Hannah. "People change. I owe it to my daughter to find out how."

"Jenny is our daughter," said Bill deliberately. "Ours!"

Again, the raised eyebrows. "Maybe," said Hannah. "We'll see. They've been very slow with the blood test."

7

In The Health Club, Sidney worked on curls with ninety pounds, while a wiry man behind him did head raises with a weight between his teeth.

"Never saw that particular exercise," commented Sidney after a while.

"Ya yub iz ooh eeweop—"

"What?"

The man removed the small bar from his mouth. "You use this to develop the neck," he said.

Sidney nodded.

"Neck is the main weak spot in the body. You probably think it's the genitalia, right?"

"I don't know, I—"

"Yeah, yeah. Most people do. You ask 'em, 'What's the body's main weak spot?' an' they say right away, 'The nuts.' I do this all the time. I ask ten, twelve people every party I'm at." He smiled, showing several missing teeth.

"But they're wrong, see. Main weak spot is the neck."

"Mmm," said Sidney, continuing with the curls. He'd come down to The Health Club to relieve the tension, and the boredom. Diana was a nervous wreck, tense and irritable. Sidney had always found exercise relaxing. Besides, you never knew when you might meet someone interesting.

"Twelve years," continued the wiry man, "I studied the martial arts. Okinawan Karate, Chinese Shaolin Temple Kung Fu, Korean Tai Kwon Do, French Savate, and then I finally found the best one."

"Western gunfighting?" said Sidney, realizing now he was talking with a maniac.

"It's a form used in Africa by the Bantu. It's based on the movements of the armadillo. Yeah, yeah, I see you smiling, but I know. The training has you toughen up all the parts of the body—so it's like wearing a suit of armor, see? Even naked, in a shower, I'm armed to the teeth. Twice a week I go down for a lesson; my instructor beats me with sticks for two hours. Sometimes, he gives me an extra fifteen minutes if there's no one after me."

"That's very generous," said Sidney.

"See that exercise you're doing?" said the man. "Useless. What good is it to have big biceps if someone hits you? The key is toughness—hey, you wanna kick me in the jewels?"

The man rose abruptly and spread his legs.

"No, thanks," said Sidney, forcing a smile. "I'll pass."

"Go ahead," said the man magnanimously. "Be my guest."

Sidney shook his head.

"See, that's the fooler," said the man. "The real vulnerable point is the neck. All the nerves and all the muscles and all the blood from your body gotta go up through there into your head. Very bad design. I spend

a lotta time worrying about that. Rest of my body is all right, the neck . . .” He shrugged.

Sidney grabbed a towel and headed for the door.

“Hey, are you anyone?” asked the man.

Sidney stopped. “Me? No. I’m nobody.”

“Me, too,” said the man. He held out a hand for Sidney to shake. “Go ahead. Pinch it as hard as you want. Bite it. Kick it. Burn it.”

Sidney reached out and shook the hand, gripping it quite firmly and squeezing.

After several seconds the man began to wince and grunt with pain. “Hey,” he said, as Sidney quickly let go, “hey, what’s the idea? I told you to burn it, bite it, or kick it. I didn’t say anything about squeezing.” He sat down forlornly in a chair. “Now I’m all psyched out. Now I got ten years more work ahead of me on this new vulnerability.”

“Sorry,” said Sidney as he hurried away.

They walked along the beach in silence. Hannah lagged slightly behind Bill, carrying her shoes in her hand. Suddenly she stopped, backed away from the water, and plopped down in the sand. Bill, noticing her, backtracked to where she sat. They looked out at the three-foot waves as the surf rolled gently in.

“God,” said Hannah. “I love oceans. Why do they have to screw them up with the mess in between?”

“Is that what happens to angry old liberals? They become pessimists?”

That’s the horrible thing about this type of conversation, thought Bill. You can’t stop. Eventually, that’s how you think. Every utterance must have an associated dig.

“Angry old liberals,” said Hannah, “just become angry and old.” She traced a circle in the sand. “Whatever happened to the second Mrs. Warren, by the way?”

CALIFORNIA SUITE

Bill briefly pictured Laurie, his wife for five years. She was a tall redhead, giggly, scatterbrained, terrific in bed. Terrific with *anybody*, unfortunately. He'd married her nine weeks after returning to California, hadn't seen her now for two years.

"Laurie was on the road a lot. I liked to stay home. The first three years weren't too bad."

"That's right, she was a singer, wasn't she?"

"Still is, as far as I know."

"Yeah," mused Hannah. "Matter of fact, somebody sent me one of her albums for Christmas as a gag. They were right. I gagged."

Bill looked at her. "How about a swim?"

Hannah tilted her head and smiled slyly. "Skinny dipping at two in the afternoon? You *have* gotten lively, Billy."

"A friend of mine owns the beach house down about a hundred yards." He pointed in the direction they'd been walking. "You see it over there? I have the key. I'm sure she has a suit that'll fit you."

"Does it have a top? We're very conservative back east."

"It has a top. Matter of fact it has two tops. Doesn't have a bottom, though."

She smiled as he grabbed her hand and pulled her up.

He swam slowly but, as always, the ocean stimulated morbid fantasies. He would get a wrenching stomach cramp, double into a tight knot, panic, thrash wildly. . . . Or Hannah, beside him, would suddenly go limp, swallow water; he'd carry her for several strokes, but then his poor technique would sap his strength, and he'd feel her slipping, slipping. . . . Or a fin would abruptly appear, twenty yards away, then vanish from view—and suddenly a sharp

tug on his leg, a tearing, red stains bubbling up around him. . . .

He was relieved to stumble up on the beach. Hannah sank down beside him, exhausted.

"Christ! Five million cigarettes are murder on the lungs."

"When you were younger," said Bill, "you were the healthiest girl I knew. What happened?"

Hannah shrugged. "With Nixon in the White House, good health seemed to be in bad taste."

They hauled themselves two feet farther up the beach. Hannah reached around behind her, stuck two fingers under her bathing suit, and pulled some material down to cover her half-exposed cheeks.

"Your friend is about one size too small for me. How does she fit you?"

Bill envisioned JoAnne's tight, lithe little body, felt the strong legs wrapped around him. . . . "Nicely, thank you."

"Is this the neophyte actress with the golden hair that Jenny tells me about? Am I being too nosey?"

"Not for a *Newsweek* editor. Yes, she is. And she's a damned good actress. Married before."

"Ah, also a loser," said Hannah. "Seems the only single people in the United States are either twelve years old, divorced, or institutionalized."

"She has a nine-year-old boy."

"Really? He should make a nice pet for Jenny."

"She likes him."

"And is marriage contemplated? Or is this to be a long-term relationship?"

"It's contemplated," said Bill. "It's being discussed, and seriously considered. And we all get along like clams."

"Like clams," echoed Hannah. "My impression was that they lived fairly close, but had very little to do with each other."

CALIFORNIA SUITE

"You should've been a marine biologist," said Bill.

"Probably right. At least then I'd know why a good piece of belly Nova costs a dollar eighty-nine a quarter-pound. Which reminds me, where will you live? Will there be room for all of you in the little French farmhouse, or will you have to find a Moroccan villa on Wilshire Boulevard?"

Bill shook his head. "What the hell are you so bitter about? You used to be bright and witty. Now you're just snide and sarcastic."

"It comes with age," said Hannah. "When you don't have a fastball any more, you go to change-ups and sliders."

"You've been throwing beanballs," said Bill.

"Your bean is your least vital part," said Hannah.

A big wave broke, and as the water washed over her legs, she rose. "Can we go? I feel like we're playing *From Here to Eternity*."

Bill stood up.

The house was furnished sparsely but comfortably: white shag carpet in the living room, large black leatherette couch, Kandinsky prints on the walls, Formica breakfast bar with three stools. Bill emerged from the kitchen alcove carrying a small tray. On it were two tall glasses—JoAnne always had three or four empties cooling in the refrigerator—filled with frosty, fizzing clear liquid. Peels of lemon perched on the rims. He walked to where Hannah was standing, wearing a terrycloth robe over her wet bathing suit, and proffered the drinks.

Hannah turned—she'd been staring at a picture on an end table—and selected the glass nearest her. She drained it a quarter of the way.

"You always did make a good gin-and-tonic."

Bill sipped his own drink. "The secret is to pre-

chill the glasses. And serve them with a flourish. Otherwise, the ingredients are the same."

"I thought you didn't have any bad habits," said Hannah.

Bill raised his glass. "Yours is gin and tonic. Mine is just tonic. Cheers." He drank some more.

"Tricky. Slipping the contents of the poison ring to the Queen."

"Just following orders."

"But while you weren't looking I switched the drinks."

"And while you were staring at the picture I switched them back." He glanced at the eight-by-ten of himself and JoAnne, her blond hair streaming down her back.

"Pretty girl," said Hannah.

"I think so," said Bill.

"I suppose if Jenny stays she'll grow up to look like that. Blond hair, blond teeth, blond life . . ."

Bill smiled wanly. "God, I can just hear the quips when you and the second best mind since Adlai Stevenson get together."

"They're not simply quips, they're—"

"Sitting there freezing under a blanket at the Washington Redskins' games, playing anagrams with the names of all the Polish players . . ." He took a large gulp of his drink. Despite what he'd told Hannah, it was mostly gin. "I'll tell you something, Hannah, for one of the brightest women in America, you bore the hell out of me. Talking to you is like playing the dozens. Your mind clicks off brickbats so damn fast it never has a chance to let an honest emotion or thought get through."

Hannah's mouth tightened. She drew the robe more closely around her. "And you're so filled with honest emotions, such quivering and exposed sensitivity, that you fall in love every time someone sings a ballad."

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You're worse than a hopeless romantic, you're a *hopeful* one."

"You mean I'm not one of the ambulant dead."

"I mean you're the kind of man who would end the world's famine problem by having them all eat out . . . preferably at a good Chinese restaurant."

Bill looked at the ceiling, then back at her. "Oh, for God's sake, please, let's stop this crap. I don't know if your bitterness is because Jenny ran away, or because she ran away to someone whose life style epitomizes everything you consider cheap and banal—"

"Shallow, trite."

"*Happy*. You ever hear that word? Remember it from a book, maybe? Something you read long ago? *Happy and contented*."

Hannah drained her glass. "You have no legal rights to her. You understand that."

"Certainly."

"Then tell her to come home with me."

"I did. She would like to try it with me for a year. She's not happy in New York, Hannah."

Hannah brought her glass to the sink. "*Nobody's* happy in New York. But they're *alive*."

"Not according to Senator Proxmire."

"Now who's making the mindless quips? And look whom you pick for your spokesman, a guy who seeds his head with ryegrass because he can't stand the thought of growing gracefully bald. I think his attitude is typical California."

"He's from Wisconsin."

"He's from out of town. Out of any town."

Bill shook his head. "God, what a snob you are."

"Thank Him there's a few of us left." She headed for the bathroom, as Bill followed. "I've got to shower," she said. "The salt on my body makes me feel like a pretzel."

Bill trailed her into the bathroom. "What is there," he began, "that's—"

"Do you mind?" she said, removing the robe. "May I have some privacy, please?"

He nodded and stepped out as she shut the door. "What is there," he repeated loudly, "so beautiful about your life that makes it so important to put down everyone else's? I'll tell you—nothing."

From inside: "You ask the questions and you answer them. How convenient. A self-contained system. Do you take yourself to dinner a lot? Which of the two of you picks up the check?"

"Your xenophobia actually has nothing to do with New York, does it? It has to do with you."

He heard the shower go on, the sharp splash as it hit the tub, muted suddenly by flesh as Hannah interposed herself. "You're a conservative, aren't you?" he said. "You're *afraid* to change."

"What?"

He stepped into the bathroom

"Close the door, I'm getting a breeze," Hannah told him.

He shut the door. "New York is your security blanket, isn't it?" he said. "Your anchor."

"Thank you, doctor. But didn't you give up analysis?"

"You know New York really isn't the center of the goddam universe. I grant you it's an exciting, vibrant, stimulating, fabulous city, but it's not Mecca. It just smells like it."

He saw the bathing suit Hannah had worn, folded up and soaking in the sink. He could make out her form through the shower curtain; she'd just raised her arms.

"The hell with New York," she said. "Or Boston or Washington. You're really missing the point. I don't care where Jenny lives, but *how*."

"She can live very well in California." He watched Hannah's shadow-shape rub the soap on her neck, then down over her breasts. Damn! She still had a terrific body, the body of a woman ten years younger. Taut and tight, she hadn't lost a thing.

"She's an intelligent girl with a good mind," said Hannah. "Let it grow and prosper."

"You make it sound like an azalea bush," said Bill. "It will do fine out here."

"Really?" said Hannah. She reached a hand between her legs, rubbed for an instant, then stepped back into the cascading water and turned her face upward.

For the tiniest moment of time, Bill felt himself back in love with her again. Aroused, true, but also something else . . . that upward tilt of her face, her brave talk, alone in a strange house, by herself . . .

"Listen," Hannah said, "what the hell is she going to learn in a community whose greatest literary achievement is a map of the movie stars' homes?"

He was out of love. "Tell me about it, Hannah. Tell me about the political elite in Martha's Vineyard in July. I remember vividly the charity luncheons to raise money for the California grape pickers. A teeming mob of women who must have spent twelve thousand dollars on new Gucci pants in order to raise *two* thousand dollars for the grape pickers. He shook his head. "Why the hell didn't they just mail them the pants?"

She turned off the shower. "You were terrific when you used to write like that."

"Yes, I was terrific—except we were starving. No one wants to read that kind of stuff or see it acted, except some eccentric members of effete Eastern literary circles."

"Your writing was not for chuckleheads. At least you had some wit." She peeked out around the shower curtain. "Could you step out, please?"

Bill clicked his tongue in annoyance, but retreated

behind the door. "I write now about human beings, and I write for human beings. People whose every word is not dripping acid."

"Oh," said Hannah, from inside. "Well, I didn't see the last picture you wrote, but they tell me it grossed very well in backward areas."

"Jee-sus," said Bill. "Was I anything like you before?"

Hannah guffawed. "Hah! You? I couldn't hold a candle to you."

"No wonder no one spoke to me here for the first two years after I came back."

"Lucky you," said Hannah.

She emerged from the bathroom wearing the terry robe and supporting one of those complicated towel-turbans that women construct after a hairwash. Bill followed her into the bedroom. Her clothes were laid out on the bed where she'd left them.

"Must I ask you each time I want some privacy?" she said, as he stood there. "I'd like to get dressed."

"Look," said Bill, ignoring her, "I don't want to interrupt your train of venom, but we've got to settle this today."

"We can settle it just as well with you out of the room."

"Hannah, really, it is not reasonable to hold a conversation through a closed door. I mean, what do you imagine is going on here? We were married for millions of years, or at least it seemed that way. I saw you naked every night. Are you afraid I'll get uncontrollably excited?"

"I have many anxieties," said Hannah, "but *that* is not one of them." She remembered their last six months together, a living horror. He'd been temporarily impotent, claimed she'd psychically castrated him. Nothing she'd done had helped, including keeping silent.

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"Are you afraid your body doesn't measure up to the owner of the bathing suit?" Bill said. "Afraid it's deteriorated in nine years? It hasn't. I saw enough through the shower sheet to guarantee it."

Hannah shook her head. "I can't believe we're really discussing this. Look, if it's so important to you to see me naked, stay. I hate to frustrate your voyeurism."

"Tell you what," said Bill. "Compromise. I'll stay, but I'll turn my head in deference to your up-tight East Coast morality."

"Privacy!" insisted Hannah. "And don't do me any favors. It's you who's the crazy one." And with that, she removed the robe.

He looked for a long time, sweeping his eyes up and down—from her face, across the puckered nipples, the taut belly, the lightly-haired cleft, the sleek thighs. She stood still.

"Satisfied?" she said after a moment.

Bill shrugged. "Was that so bad?"

"I don't see what it accomplished." She began to dress.

"I neither raped you, nor laughed at you. That's something, isn't it?"

"It's not much."

"All right. Getting back to Jenny. If you respect her as a person, respect her right to make a free choice."

Hannah slipped on her panties, and then her stockings, "You get her for the summers, that's enough. It takes me the other ten months of the year to get the seaweed out of her brains."

"How much time do you spend with her?" said Bill. "Do you ever have breakfast with her? How many nights does she eat dinner alone? Do you think she's really happy with that twenty-dollar bill you give her every time you go off to Washington for the weekend?"

The girl is growing up lonely, Hannah, and she's flown out here on her own savings to prove it to you."

"Don't," said Hannah, "accept uncritically everything that's told you. There is more than meets the ear."

"That what they teach you at *Newsweek*? Motto for cub reporters?" said Bill. He watched as she put on her bra. It was amazing. It was actually sexier to see a woman dress than to watch her undress, or even see her naked.

"Jenny has two dogs," said Hannah, "a Dominican cook, and every good-looking boy in the senior class living off of my refrigerator. Despite her Gothic reports, she is *not* living the life of Jane Eyre." She reached in back to clasp the hooks of her brassiere, missed.

"You need some help?" Bill stepped forward.

"No," said Hannah sharply. "No help required." She tried again, and made it.

"Would you like to know what Jenny has to say about you?" asked Bill.

Hannah removed the towel-turban from her head. She dried her hair vigorously in front of the mirror, then combed it out. She put on her slip. "She's told me," she said. "She thinks I'm a son-of-a-bitch. She also thinks I'm a *funny* son-of-a-bitch!"

"And that doesn't bother you?"

"Bother? She *loves* me, but she just doesn't like me. She's afraid of me. She's—"

"She's intimidated by you."

"Yes. Intimidated. She respects me, but wouldn't like to become like me." She paused and looked at him. "In other words, we have a perfectly normal mother and daughter relationship." She squirmed into her dress.

"How the hell can you be so flippant when it comes to your own daughter's well-being?" said Bill.

"And how the hell can you be so pompous as

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not to recognize a very healthy rebellious attitude in an adolescent?"

"I don't think you're the one to judge what's healthy."

"Oh," said Hannah, her voice rising. "And who is? Huh? You?"

"I didn't say that."

"If she *didn't* complain," said Hannah, "*that's* when I would probably send her to an expensive shrink. Since she's with me ten months of the year, it's only natural *you're* the one she's going to miss. I think, by and large, she and I have managed quite well, but it's obvious that, like all young girls, she needs a father image."

"She needs more than an image, she needs me."

Hannah stepped into her low heels. "I don't mind. If it's only July and August, it might as well be you."

"This is April, and she came out without your permission."

"She never had a good head for dates." She turned to him. "Ready to go?"

He opened his mouth to say something, then suddenly realized that he was still in his bathing suit. All this time, and he was still in his trunks. "Five minutes," he said.

He hurried into the bathroom, stepped into the shower, removed the suit, quickly soaped and rinsed. He dried himself perfunctorily with the small remaining towel. At the bathroom door, he paused.

"I'm coming out," he announced. "What you do is up to you."

There was silence. "Fair's fair," she said finally.

He stepped out and walked to the bedroom. She was sitting on a corner of the bed, and her gaze didn't waver when she saw him. He noticed her eyes moving over his body, as his had over hers. Too bad, thought Bill. Too bad they could never make it together. A strange

thing: were it any other woman, even one considerably less attractive, he'd probably have an erection. But this one used her tongue only to hurt and wound, not to excite. He walked to the closet and took his slacks and shirt off the hangers.

"You've a terrific ass," Hannah said appraisingly. "Absolutely gorgeous. Best I've ever seen."

Bill slapped on the slacks. "I'm too old to get embarrassed, Hannah."

"Really. It's meant as a compliment, no sarcasm intended. Nice stomach muscles, too. I noticed even on the beach."

"I do situps," said Bill. It was simply beyond his imagination to conceive of flattery from her. He finished dressing, and they walked through the living room to the door. "What would you do," he said, "if I just keep Jenny here with me?"

They stepped outside into the warm afternoon sun.

"I will call my friend, the Attorney General of the United States, if Jenny is not on that nine o'clock plane tonight."

"And he will send twenty FBI men, disguised as surfers, down to get me at the beach," said Bill. "Tell them to wear sandals."

"Can't," said Hannah. "Against regulation dress code. They'll come for you in black Florsheims, or nothing."

They walked back to Old Malibu Road. "Why didn't you ever run for office, Hannah? I always thought you'd make a helluva governor."

"Because I don't think a democratic system really works. Offer me a monarchy and we'll talk"

He smiled. She was so smart and witty. A beautiful woman, self-reliant, sharp . . . and impossible.

"It's now two-thirty," said Hannah, looking at her watch. "Will you call Jenny, or shall I?"

"No!"

"No, what?"

Bill smirked. "No, *sir!*"

They trudged along in silence for several moments.

"The truth, Hannah," said Bill calmly. "You know if we leave it up to Jenny, you don't stand a chance in hell of getting her on that plane."

They reached the car. Hannah had lit a cigarette. "Less than that, I'd say." She exhaled smoke. "Jenny's got spirit, I'll say that for her."

They squeezed into the car.

"The kid's got a problem," said Bill as they drove off. "And right now she needs a shoulder to cry on."

"Yes," said Hannah, "but I'll be damned if I'm giving up a daughter for a pink cashmere shoulder three thousand miles away."

Bill looked over at her. Strangely, even after all that had been said, he felt . . . tender. "You know, this is an event, it really is."

"You mean me coming here, or us going for a swim?"

"It's the first time in my life I've ever seen you so vulnerable." He grinned. "Personally, I find it attractive."

Hannah smiled back at him. "You're pretty cute yourself. I mean it. Apart from the nice ass. Why the hell do men get better-looking as they get older?"

"Some men."

"Most. Anyway, remind me to bring it up to the Equal Rights Commission."

He stepped heavily on the gas, and the car responded with a throaty growl as they sped back toward the hotel.

8

Millie gave him a final check-out as the taxi pulled up and waited for him in front of their house.

"Excedrin you have?"

"Ya."

"You have Bufferin, too, in case the Excedrin aggravates your stomach?"

"I have Bufferin, too," Marvin intoned. "And I have Milanta in case the Bufferin aggravates the Excedrin. And—Millie, I gotta go. Don't worry, I'm a walking pharmacy. If I don't get sick, they'll get me for drug possession."

He kissed her on the lips.

"Just be careful," she said. "Sit near the back of the plane."

"I packed a parachute in my duffel bag," said Marvin. The taxi driver tooted the horn. "Millie, I'll see you tomorrow, all right? Say goodbye to David and Janis

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for me, okay? Tell them Daddy will be home in a couple of days."

"I still don't see why your brother couldn't invite *them* to the bar mitzvah also."

Marvin shrugged. "Look, you know how it is. You gotta draw a line."

"Yes, but why through his brother's family?"

"Mill, I gotta run. I'll miss my plane. Goodbye, my darling."

He blew a final kiss, then walked to the curb carrying a large valise and a smaller piece of hand luggage.

"Kennedy, right?" said the cabbie, when Marvin was inside.

"Right."

They started out. "Little time away from the missus, hah?" said the cabbie.

"Right," said Marvin.

"Where ya goin', Florida?"

"California."

The cabbie chuckled. "California, huh? Alone, too. You're gonna have some ball. I hear the women there are entirely different from the broads around here."

"Really?" said Marvin, leaning back. "What are they, bibliophiles?"

The cabbie glanced in the rear-view mirror. "Well, you know, they got their gay groups just like we do. No, what I meant was that they're a lot friendlier out there. They appreciate the men more."

"No kidding?"

"Yeah, yeah. Guy like you, alone, they jump all over him. You could get laid three, four times a night, different woman each time."

Marvin pictured his small bottle of Valium. "Do I look sixteen to you?"

"I'm just telling you," said the cabbie. They entered the Long Island Expressway.

"If I got laid four times in one night," said Marvin, "they'd carry me out in an urn. A *small* urn. Besides, my wife is flying out tomorrow to join me. And double besides, I don't do that type of fooling around."

"Oh, of course not," said the driver, cutting over to the left-hand lane. "And this cab don't have an engine, either. I got eight reindeer under the hood." He gave a low, rumbling laugh.

Marvin felt himself begin to get a headache.

The Mama, the Papa, the boy with the camera, and the girl with the pigtails marched single-file through the corridor.

"Ya, iss goot," said Papa stiffly, when the bellhop had shown them their room.

Inside, Mama lay down on one of the beds, the boy on the other. The girl turned on the Zenith twenty-three-inch color TV. "You shudd relax, Karl," said Mama.

Veins stood out in the man's neck.

"You shudd lie down next to Eric, unt you vill cool off."

"Oh, I cool off," said Papa, opening the door of the hotel room. "I cool off ven I find zose black criminalz, und I teach zem a lessson. I know zey are here. Soon, I relax." He stepped back out into the hall.

One floor below, in a room directly under Karl Machtinger's, Willis Panama was talking on the phone. The Panamas' room was large and comfortable, with two queen-sized beds, a fluorescent-lit dressing area, and a sumptuous bathroom with an infra-red drying lamp. Willis sipped a gin and tonic as he spoke.

"Yes, we'd like the court from ten to eleven tomorrow morning." He shifted the glass to his other hand and looked out through the terrace sliding doors at the lush palm trees in the distance. "And you split the charges

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with me and Doctor Gump . . . balls and everything. Thank you very much." He hung up.

Bettina sat in the dressing area brushing her hair. She had on a new turquoise outfit and looked very attractive. "How'd you make out?" she called.

Willis grinned contentedly. "We're all set for the morning." He began to rock back and forth. "We're going to *cream* them—six-love, six-love. And if we got time, six-love again."

"Maybe Lola isn't up to tennis," said Bettina. "Her back was really hurting her."

"Are you kidding?" said Willis, putting down his drink. "She'll be out there at two in the morning practicing her overhead. I know him; he'll give her pain-killers all night. I'm gonna give him a call." He picked up the phone and started to dial.

In the room above, Mama had fallen asleep. Strangely, in her dream, she kept hearing the voice of the very man her husband was so determinedly searching for.

In a different part of the hotel, Sidney sat in the living room watching David Sheehan on the evening news.

"The dark horse in this year's Oscar derby is England's Diana Barrie, one of the most respected actresses in the business and perhaps best known for her portrayals of Shakespearean queens and Pinter heroines in London's National Theatre. She—"

"They're talking about you on television," yelled Sidney into the bedroom.

"Turn it off!" came Diana's voice.

"They say you're respected."

A wailing sound came from the other room.

"What happened?" yelled Sidney anxiously.

"'Respected' is the word they use when you're widely hated. 'Beloved' is what they call people who are

only narrowly hated. 'Beloveds' have a chance."

Sidney turned back to TV. There was nothing else to do.

"—up for her first Oscar," continued Sheehan, "in a funny but featherweight comedy that might have slipped by unnoticed if it weren't for her acerbic wit and perfect comic timing. In Michael Polaski's *No Left Turns* she—"

"They say you had acerbic wit," shouted Sidney.

"Up their ass!" said Diana annoyedly.

"What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing, except I just put on my dress and it looks like a Hefty Bag."

"—out of the gate slow, but just might be wearing roses at the finish line."

"They say you might be wearing roses," said Sidney. He sipped his drink and waited for her response, but none came. "Then I won't be the only thorn in your side," he said softly to himself.

The phone rang, and he lifted the receiver. "Yes?"

"Mr. Barrie?"

"Speaking."

"This is the service desk. Miss Barrie's limousine is here."

"Yes? Oh. We'll be down in five minutes. Thank you."

Diana came out of the bedroom. She was wrapped in gauzy blue-green, not quite symmetric. "Disaster!" she said. "Total disaster. The *Titanic* in chiffon."

Sidney took another long sip of his drink.

"I'm listing to the left, Sidney. God, I hope it's the floor. Sidney, look—and try to be gentle."

"Channel Five just picked you as a dark horse." He swiveled slowly. "They must have seen the dress."

"You hate it," Diana pouted.

"How much was it?" asked Sidney calmly.

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"Nothing. Joe Pickman paid for it."

Sidney brightened. "Then I love it."

"Damn it!" said Diana. "I wish you didn't have such good taste."

"It's my curse," said Sidney.

"I have a definite hump on my left shoulder," continued Diana. "I mean it cost five hundred pounds and I look like Richard the Third." She walked toward him. "Do you notice the hump, Sidney?"

"Isn't that your regular hump?"

"Don't joke with me," said Diana sternly. "I'm going on national television."

"There are no humps," said Sidney. "I see no humps at this particular time." He finished his drink.

"I wonder if you can see *anything* at this particular time."

"I can see that you're a winner."

"How do you mean that?"

"Winner. One who wins. Just watch your step on your way up to the stage."

"I should have worn something simple," said Diana nervously. "My black pants suit. Why the hell didn't I wear my black pants suit?"

"Because *I'm* wearing it!" said Sidney.

"Fine," said Diana. "Just remember, the fly's on the side. Do be careful when urinating."

"I'll practice until it comes out right."

"We shouldn't have come," said Diana suddenly. "I never know how to dress in this bloody country. They seem to make up the rules as they go along. In England it's so easy, you just put on warm clothing. Why did we come, Sidney?"

"Because it's all free, darling."

"Glenda Jackson never comes, and she's nominated every goddam year. We could have stayed in London and waited for a phone call."

"Forget the 'could haves,' " said Sidney. "We could have made plaster casts of yeti footprints in Oregon, or spent days shaving each other's legs. But we didn't. We're here, so make the best of it."

Diana ignored him. "David Niven could have accepted for me."

"David Niven doesn't exist. All these years he's really been played by Dustin Hoffman."

"He would be bright and witty—and no one would have seen my hump."

"Use the hump, sweetheart. People will pity you for your deformity and you're sure to win."

Diana walked over to where Sidney sat. "Maybe if you put your arm on my shoulder . . ." She bent down and placed his arm around her. "Keep it there at all times. If I win, we'll go up together, your arm around me, and they'll think we're still mad for each other after twelve years."

Sidney looked up at her. "Oh, I thought we were. I keep forgetting."

"How many gin and tonics have you had?" said Diana.

"More than one, less than a hund—"

"Oh, come on!"

"Three gins, one tonic."

"Well, catch up on your tonics. We don't want to be disgusting tonight, do we?"

"We may not have a choice," said Sidney.

"Listen, just don't *you* embarrass me tonight. If anyone is going to make a fool out of me, it'll be me."

"I'm better qualified," said Sidney. He added quickly, "But you own the business."

Diana fluffed her hair as he got up to shut off the television. "They say the programming here is geared for nine-year-olds," he commented. "I rather like it. Kind

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of an emetic for the mind, you know? Let's you make room for a higher grade of drivel."

"What's wrong with my hair?" said Diana. "It looks like I've combed it with a towel."

"Fright wigs? Isn't that what they call them here?" said Sidney. "Or is it fake furs? I forget which."

"I could say my hairdresser just had shock therapy."

"Really, Di, when you played Elizabeth you looked like a wart hog and you never complained once."

"I squealed and grunted, but did anyone listen? Besides, that's acting, this is living. Living, I want to be beautiful."

"Beauty is only skin deep, my darling, and you have thin skin." Sidney wondered how much more teasing and self-deprecation she could take before she grew irritable, perhaps went into an irreversible sulk. He knew all this was a ritual, an externalizing of her self-doubts and insecurities, but he had long ago grown tired of playing by her rules. Too much sensitivity required and sensitivity took too much effort. If she was thin-skinned, he had grown thick-skinned.

Diana was over by the mirror. "My hair is the strangest color," she said.

"I don't think chartreuse is strange," Sidney said.

"I asked for a simple rinse, and that ditsy queen gave me crayons."

"You deny others' attempts at creativity?"

"No," said Diana. "Only in my line of work, it's of limited advantage to be invisible in tall grass."

"Shall I walk with my arm on your head as well?"

"Oh, Christ, I hate getting dressed like this," said Diana. "Why am I always so much more comfortable as someone else? I could have come as Marie Antoinette. I would have been perfectly happy going as Hedda Gabler."

"Try Quasimodo," said Sidney.

"Try shutting up."

"Oh, you wouldn't like that," said Sidney. "You know you need my support and encouragement to keep you going. Shall I call Joe Pickman and tell him you can't make it, you have another affair?"

Diana ignored him. "Check me out. Do I have too much jewelry on?"

Sidney adjusted his glasses on the bridge of his nose. "Jingle it. I can't tell if I don't hear it."

Diana moved her filigreed gold bracelet back and forth on her wrist. It made no sound. Sidney remembered when he'd bought it for her, seven years ago, their fifth anniversary. Funny that she'd wear it now. After all, she had much better stuff.

"You must've selected the cheap rubbish," he said. "I can't hear a thing."

"Will you please be nice to me and pay me one bloody compliment?" said Diana. "I've been getting dressed for this horseshit affair for three hours."

"More like ten years," said Sidney. He shook his head. "Oh, Diana, you're just—"

"What?" Her eyes were blazing and the muscles in her neck were taut as guitar strings. "*What??*"

Sidney sighed. "I was about to say you're making a mountain out of a molehill, but I didn't think it would amuse you."

For the thirtieth time since she'd emerged from the bedroom, Diana pressed down the little lump of material over her left shoulder. And for the thirtieth time, it popped back up. "That's not funny, Sidney. That's bizarre. Give me a drink."

Sidney walked over to the end table with its ice bucket and two quarts of liquor. He placed three cubes in a six-ounce glass, then filled it two-thirds full with Scotch. He handed it to Diana.

"You have the most bizarre sense of humor," she said.

"Bizarre people often do."

She put the glass to her lips, looked at him carefully, then tilted her head back and drained the contents. She held the glass out for a refill.

"Again."

"Di—"

"Again. And stop worrying. I won't get pissed until *after* I lose."

Sidney reluctantly refilled the glass. "The car is out front, waiting."

"Jesus," said Diana. "Why do they have these bloody things so early?"

"East Coast television audience, I expect," said Sidney, handing her the drink. "Can't stay up too late. Important for them to know who the top cinematographer was before they get up for their jobs cleaning sardines and polishing toilet seats, or whatever."

"It's just that no woman can look good at five o'clock in the afternoon," said Diana. "Except possibly Tatum O'Neal."

"Will you finish your drink?" said Sidney impatiently. "I don't want to miss the sound editing awards."

Diana belted down her second three ounces of Scotch, then picked up her handbag and cape. "I look like Superman, and you look like Clark Kent. This'll be the first time we're seen together in public. It'll really throw a lot of people off."

They headed for the door.

"All those bloody photographers and newsmen," said Diana. "I can't wait to see how they explain my hump in the papers."

In the corridor, she took Sidney's arm and gripped it very tightly.

9

Hannah unlocked the door to her hotel room and Bill followed her in. He was nervous. The time for decision was at hand, and he dreaded it the way, as a boy, he'd dreaded taking tests in school. Hannah reached in her purse for her cigarettes, withdrew the last one from the pack and lit it.

Bill closed the door. "Well," he said, "aside from a critical decision that's still to be made, it's been a nice day."

Hannah said nothing.

"Hannah?"

"I'm out of cigarettes," she snapped. "I can't be expected to give up my daughter and cigarettes on the same day."

Bill moved toward the phone. "I could call up—" He stopped because he saw something in Hannah's eyes, her face, that he'd never observed before. That, in all likelihood, had never been there before—a look of ab-

ject pleading, a beseeching expression of a supplication that was also evident in her voice.

"I have only one more year with her. Next September she'll go to college. In four years she'll come out a revolutionary or a nun. Or even worse, like you or me." Hannah took a long drag on her cigarette.

"A little bit of both wouldn't be so bad," said Bill. He fought down his feelings. There really was no reason to be sorry for her. She'd brought on everything herself, by her own actions.

"Do you like your mother?" asked Hannah.

"My mother?" said Bill, puzzled. "She's dead." Picture: Cemetery. He standing next to his father, holding the old man tightly around the shoulders as the coffin was lowered into the grave.

"Don't quibble," said Hannah curtly. "*Did* you like her?"

"Yes. Yes, I liked her. I even loved her, if that word is still permissible in polite company."

"Since when were we polite company," said Hannah. "Anyway, I don't like mine much."

"How is Beatrice, by the way?"

"Making everyone crazy, as usual," said Hannah. "She's in the Riverdale Health Related Facility. Fifth home in five years—the others threw her out. She fights with the other—what do you call them?—inmates."

"Residents."

"Whatever. She complains. She organizes petitions. She—" Hannah saw Bill looking at her, the withheld grin. "All right—like daughter, like mother. So it's in the genes. Can you imagine being a pain in the ass for seventy-eight years? I felt something was wrong even when I was in the womb. I never felt comfortable. I think I was hanging too low."

"Maybe you still are," said Bill softly. He had an urge to pat her on the head.

"We shouldn't have had Jenny," Hannah continued, her voice grown throaty. "People like you and me are too selfish. I don't want her to grow up hating me, and I don't want her growing up here because I'm liable to hate her."

"I don't think either of you will hate the other," said Bill. "You've been through too much together for that. If anything, I should be the villain, but I really don't think that'll come to pass, either. Life is just too complicated for simple reactions."

"Maybe you and I should have stayed together, and we could have let Jenny go," mused Hannah. She cocked her head. "What do you think?"

Bill smiled. "I think you finally came up with the solution," he said. "A bit late, but why carp? I also think you're still one of the most interesting women I ever met."

"Terrific," said Hannah. "Submit my profile to the *Reader's Digest*."

"Always with the quips, eh?" said Bill.

"Yes, alw— no." She looked down. "No, not always. He's not going to live very long, you know."

"What? Who isn't? What're you talking about?"

"My *Washington Post* friend. He had open-heart surgery that was a total waste of time."

"I'm sorry to hear that." Actually, Bill felt nothing at all. The man was a stranger, a news item. Why should he care?

"He was in NYU Medical Center. They decided he needed three valves. Specialist from Chicago operated on him four months ago. When they opened him up, they found his whole chest cavity filled with cancer. Everything. Lungs, lymph glands, the works. They put in two of the valves, then sewed him back up. What could they do?"

"Shame," said Bill.

"Ya," said Hannah. "The man could really make me laugh." She paused to gather herself, took a deep breath. "Oh, well. You win some, you lose some."

Bill nodded. "Hey, talk about resiliency . . ."

"For a smart lady in a man's world, I'm not doing too bad."

"Just the opposite, I'd say."

"Tell me something, Bill. Is—"

"No more Billy?"

Hannah looked down. "No. No more." She took a final drag on the cigarette, a tiny nub now, then smothered it in an ashtray. "Is being in love better now?"

Bill nodded.

"Why?"

"Because it's now."

Hannah shook her head. "Christ! I can't wait to become a grandmother. I think I screwed up the first time around." She felt the tears well up behind her eyes, the constriction in her chest and throat. Desperately, she fought for control.

The phone rang.

Bill, who'd been watching her, got up to answer it, deliberately turning his back. He wanted to give her time to regain her composure. He knew how much pride she had—how she'd always felt it was a weak, womanish thing to cry; how, in all their married years, he'd seen her weep perhaps only two or three times. He picked up the receiver.

"Hello?" he said.

"Dad? It's me."

"Hi!"

"Dad, I'm out in front with all my stuff. I've decided to leave it completely up to you and Mom. Whatever you want, I'll do. You want me to talk to Mom to tell her?"

"No, that's all right," said Bill. "I'll take care of it. See ya in a bit." He hung up.

Hannah stared at him questioningly.

"Jenny," said Bill. "She's downstairs right outside the hotel. She brought her luggage."

Hannah looked startled.

"She says it's up to us," continued Bill, his voice not hiding his own surprise. "She'll abide by any decision we both make."

"And you agreed?" said Hannah. She opened her purse to fish out another cigarette, then snapped it angrily shut as she realized there were none.

"Certainly I agreed," said Bill.

Hannah pinched her lips together and shook her head. "Oh, what a cunning bastard you are. If we say she goes back to New York, she'll think I coerced you. And if we say stay here, she'll think I didn't even put up a fight for her."

"You could reason exactly the opposite, substitute me for you, and you'd just as likely be correct," said Bill. "Besides, do you really think she has that devious a mind?"

Hannah very nearly snorted. "Of course! She's *my* daughter! I know her reasoning inside out."

"Maybe you've got it inside out."

Hannah extended an index finger. "I don't suppose you'd consider spending ten months of the year back East?"

"Only if everyone there leaves," said Bill casually.

For some odd reason, totally without rationale, he began to relax, to loosen up. Somehow, the right decision is going to come out, he thought. But another, quieter part of his brain whispered: *That's right, shmuck, lull yourself to sleep with a false sense of optimism.*

"You want me to make it easy for you, Hannah?" he said. "I'll throw in my vote. Whatever you say goes. And I'll tell Jenny we *both* made the decision."

"Jesus," said Hannah. "No wonder there are so many used-car salesmen out here."

She glanced nervously at her watch, not really seeing the hands. "How much time do I have? I've always panicked at deadlines." She felt the loser's dryness in the back of the throat, the throbbing in her temples.

"As much time as you want," said Bill.

Hannah walked out on the small balcony and looked down. Damn his confidence! Below, she could see Jenny, dressed in T-shirt and jeans, suitcase and canvas backpack on the ground next to her. A baby, a little girl. Hannah could remember when she first walked, when she broke her collar bone playing baseball with the boys at age nine, when she began to menstruate. Christ, she'd only had her first date two years ago! She didn't even have her last twelve-year-old molar.

"Is it only from here that she looks so small?" said Hannah. If Bill mumbled something, she didn't hear it. She whirled and strode back inside.

"You saw her?" said Bill.

"I say she goes back," said Hannah, ignoring him.

Bill's expression changed for the slightest instant, then quickly returned to normal. "I see." He held out his hands, palms up. "All right. Then she goes back. That's all there is to it."

"You think I'm wrong, don't you?"

"I'm disappointed. . . ." He let the words hang there. "But I've always respected your convictions." He shrugged. "Would you rather I tell her?"

Hannah closed her eyes. She began to sway. "I'm so afraid," she whispered, "so afraid I'll lose her for good, Bill." Suddenly she was looking at him again, entreating, begging. "I want my daughter back, and you're the only one who can help me."

"I trust your instincts," said Bill. "If you feel it's

right, I have enough faith in Jenny that she'll see it, too." He started for the door.

"Years from now," said Hannah quietly, "I'll know whether I did the right thing today."

"You'll never know. There's no way of—"

"I'd trade the years right now for the information." She looked up at the ceiling, pressing her lips together. When her voice finally came, it was like a moan. "Keep her!"

"What?" Bill had a hand on the doorknob.

"I said, 'Keep her.' "

"You're certain?"

"But for six months, not a year. And I get to pick out the school. And whoever I pick, they have to send me three references and—" She lowered her head and balled up her fists. "Christ, what am I doing?"

Bill retreated from the door. He did not know any more what he felt. "Look," he said, "stay the weekend. Talk it over again with Jenny. You don't have to decide now just because you've got a plane ticket. This is too important to rush to a conclusion. I mean, no one's pressing you."

"I'm a fighter, *Billy*." She saw him grin. "If I stay the weekend, I not only take Jenny with me but I'll take your new girlfriend back, too."

"Don't overestimate yourself," said Bill.

"I'm not. Just the opposite, in fact. But the time to finish this is now. You set this up, let's come to a conclusion."

"Don't let me bully you into this, Hannah. Why can't the three of us talk it out?" He moved in the direction of the phone. "Let me get Jenny up here."

Hannah took a step toward him, her eyes blazing. "NO! Goddam it! If I have to give her up to get her back, then let's do it. This simply has got to end."

Bill stopped in his tracks. He could hardly believe

it. "You mean it? You'll let her stay?" He felt a surge of joy rising in his body, the heady adrenalin of victory over a tough opponent.

Hannah turned her back. "You think you're in for a picnic? Wait'll she invites twenty-two girls to sleep over."

But Bill hardly heard her. Actually it wasn't a victory at all, he realized suddenly. It was wrong to even think of it in those terms. This was his daughter they were speaking of, and she was not a spoil of war but a human being. And he'd not "defeated" his ex-wife, she'd simply made a decision, a damn difficult and mature one, one that he himself probably would have found impossible.

"You never stop amazing me, Hannah," he said.

Still facing away, she shrugged. "You amaze easily."

"I'll tell you one thing," said Bill, "you're not the same woman I left nine years ago."

Hannah turned back and half smiled. "And I'm missing the ovaries to prove it."

Bill felt lightheaded, dizzy. The realization of what had occurred was beginning to sink in. "Well," he said, "guess who's nonplussed now."

Hannah shook her head. "Jesus, you never thought I'd say 'yes,' did you?"

"No."

"Hang on to that pioneer spirit, Billy. You're going to need it raising a seventeen-year-old daughter."

"God, a full-time daughter . . ."

"Don't look now, but I think you just lost your suntan."

"If you think I'm scared," said Bill, "you're right."

Hannah began to pace back and forth. She felt—having finally taken the step—a great sense of relief. Sad, but relieved. And excited.

"I love it," she said. "Oh God, I love it!" She

grinned. "Wait'll you see how she eats in the winter. You'll be dead broke by Christmas. You won't be able to afford undershorts."

"I think you're doing a terrific thing, Hannah," said Bill seriously.

"So do I," she said.

"And if for any reason I feel that things aren't working out, I'll send her back to you."

Hannah straightened up. "No! The hell you will!"

"You won't take her?"

"I'm free now, Bill. From now on, I get to wear my own clothes again."

"Jenny wore your things?"

"Constantly," said Hannah. "Never took care of them, either. Oh, and incidentally, she loves men's shirts and jeans, just in case you thought you'd have some kind of immunity."

Bill nodded. He looked at Hannah tenderly. "I suppose you want to see her before you leave?"

"Well, you suppose wrong," she said, startling him with the promptness of her response. "I've seen her. I'll call her when I get to New York."

"What should I tell her?" asked Bill helplessly.

"Tell her I hope she'll be very happy and that I'm selling her record collection. That oughta get a rise from her. Our apartment looks like a Motown warehouse."

"You know," said Bill, "we couldn't have been too bad together. We produced a hell of a girl."

"Genes," said Hannah. "But genes maketh not a man. Or a daughter. I'll take one-third credit there."

"You deserve it. More than a third. I'll give you half."

"Besides," said Hannah, "you got that a little wrong. I think you and Jenny produced a hell of a mother."

Bill chuckled. "Maybe you're right."

"Maybe."

Bill held out his hand. "Can we shake now? I'm about to leave."

Hannah nodded. "Sure. Why not? What more can I lose?"

She put her hand in his, and he gripped it very tightly. She was quivering. "It's okay," he whispered as they walked to the door. "It's okay."

Hannah accompanied him into the corridor. "Serve her plenty of broccoli and lima beans," she said.

"She likes them?"

"Hates them. But from now on, what do I care? Your problem—you deal with it."

Bill nodded. He still held her hand, awfully small and thin-looking in his own. "Goodbye, Hannah," he said softly. "It was very good seeing you again."

"I suddenly feel like an artist selling a painting he doesn't want to part with," said Hannah.

"I'll frame it and keep it in a good light," said Bill.

"Do that," she said, fixing his image in her mind, knowing this was probably the last time she'd see him. "And take care of my daughter, too." She turned away.

Bill started for the elevator, but suddenly wheeled and stepped back behind her. Gently, he placed both hands on her shoulders, leaned over, and kissed her warmly on the cheek. Eyes closed, she reached back and touched his right hand. After half a minute, he turned again and headed down the corridor. Hannah went back inside the room and closed the door.

She breathed quickly and shallowly. She felt dazed, numbed by everything that had happened. She went out onto the balcony and hungrily gulped some air. For a moment she began to whimper, but stopped when she heard a key in the door. A three-second fantasy: Bill had come back, reconsidered everything, wanted to re-unite, the three of them, move back to New York. . . . It was the chambermaid.

"Escuse please, señora. You chwan your bed to be turn?"

Hannah looked down vacantly through the balcony railing. "What?" she called back into the room.

"I say," said the maid. "Did you chwan your bed to be turn down?"

"No," said Hannah. "I've had enough turn-downs for today."

The maid nodded and left.

Below, Hannah could see Jenny sitting on her suitcase. Suddenly Bill appeared, bounding out the front entrance of the hotel. Father and daughter spoke earnestly for almost two minutes. At last Jenny nodded her head yes, but she looked unhappy. Bill directed her attention upward to where Hannah stood watching. Jenny waved without smiling, and Hannah, marshalling all her concentration and will, managed a feeble wave back.

"Goodbye, baby," she whispered to herself.

A moment later, a boy pulled up in Bill's Mercedes and father and daughter headed away from the hotel, out onto Sunset Boulevard. It was a good deal longer before Hannah went back inside her room, alone.

10

The room was not exactly a real room; it was more like a closed-off alcove. It was carpeted, of course, at least what one could see of it, since the major floor space area was taken up by beds, one permanent against the wall, one a wheeled-in cot. There were no windows. The walls were painted a light green and decorated with surprisingly ornate mouldings.

"Ah, what the hell," Chauncey had said when they'd walked in. "For two days we'll stand it. I'll make the guy give us a real low price."

"I've seen worse," said Lola.

Fifteen minutes later she went to the bathroom. Five minutes after she emerged, the toilet was still flushing.

"The soothing sounds of running water," said Chauncey. "All right, don't panic, I'll take care of it."

He went into the tiny, tiled room and removed the cover from the toilet tank. No reason, he thought, why an M.D. should be intimidated by a lousy crapper. No

mechanical thing could conceivably be as complicated as the human body. He pressed the flush handle and studied the mechanism as it worked. It *seemed* rather simple, after all, and why not? A flotation ball connected by a lever arm to a shut-off valve. A stopper at the bottom connected by a chain to the flush handle. A small water inlet pipe, and a larger-diameter overflow. It was a cinch! Chauncey unscrewed the hollow flotation ball and shook it near his ear. Just as he'd thought. Water inside. He took it over to the sink and turned it upside down. To his surprise, nothing came out. He pounded the ball. Nothing. He smashed it with the heel of his hand. Nothing. He hit it with his fist—and broke a jagged hole in the top of the ball.

Calm, he thought. Calm, now. The problem is still fixable, but if you go berserk it will quickly escalate. He dumped a small quantity of water out of the ball through the new hole. If he screwed the float back so that the puncture faced upward, everything still ought to work. He did so. But when he test-flushed the toilet, the tank filled up only two-thirds to the top. The problem was, he realized, that by not screwing the float all the way on (which would have left the hole facing down), he'd lengthened the lever arm to the shut-off. All right. Simple enough. He'd bend up the lever arm to compensate. Chauncey felt deeply satisfied as he pressed on the eighth-inch-diameter brass rod. It resisted at first, then yielded suddenly with the faintest cracking sound. The water, formerly a narrow trickle, became a cascade. "Shit!" said Chauncey aloud. "Shit!"

"What's the matter?" called Lola from inside.

"Nothing!" yelled Chauncey. "Nothing!" He looked up at the ceiling. "Broke the inlet valve, that's all," he muttered to himself. He looked around. And suddenly, miraculously, he spotted a large pair of gas pliers through the open door of the medicine cabinet. Someone must've

left it there. What unbelievable luck! Fate, he thought. God is with me.

He seized the pliers, gripped in its jaws the rod that he'd tried to bend. First thing was to straighten that out, then see if he could disassemble the valve. He pulled strongly, and was quite surprised when the rod snapped cleanly in two, its upward momentum only partially reduced by the flush chain, which also broke, sending the rubber stopper flying out of the tank and into Chauncey's forehead. He went reeling backward into the shower stall, where he fell in a heap. He lay there for several seconds, his mind integrating all the information, working slowly and carefully. I am not dead, he thought. I am alive. I have been injured. Injured by a toilet tank in the bathroom of a maid's room in a hotel that screwed up my reservation, and where I arrived too late to do anything about it because of a stupid asshole I permitted along on the trip. Still, with everything, if I persist in remaining calm and do not become overly disturbed because a simple, inanimate mechanical assembly has had the gall, the nerve, to hurt me, to break my . . . Chauncey rose. He looked at the pliers, rod still clutched in its jaws. He felt the wet spot on his face where the stopper had hit him. He took a deep breath. "I'll *kill* it!" he screamed suddenly. "I'll *kill* it!"

Chauncey charged at the toilet tank. He pounded every inside part as hard as he could with the pliers. He pounded the inlet tube and the overflow, and the flush handle and the other few, simple parts that were not yet broken. He opened a neat crack in the tank itself, and the water came pouring out. He even pounded the toilet seat, and managed to destroy one of the hinges. At last he stopped. He replaced the pliers neatly in the medicine cabinet. He put the cover back on the tank. He felt very calm, perhaps calmer than he'd been in his whole life. He

turned off the light and walked back into the other room.

Lola was sitting on the bed, eyes fearful, her hand held over her mouth. An inch of water followed Chauncey along the floor as he emerged from the bathroom.

"I think we have a slight problem," he said easily. "Better call the desk and ask them to send up a plumber."

Lola nodded. She got up, walked into the bathroom to take a look, quickly returned. "My God!" she said. "What should I tell them?"

Chauncey shrugged. "Tell them you don't know what happened. Tell them you were just sitting here, and you suddenly heard the water begin to run." He grinned. "Tell them the truth, as best you recollect."

Lola placed the call. Twenty minutes later a plumber was at the door. He was a heavy-set man in his mid-fifties, with a gravelly voice. "I fixed this just a little while ago," he said. "What happened?" Lugging his heavy tool chest, he walked into the bathroom.

Chauncey did not follow. Instead, he lay down on one of the beds. "Beats me," he said casually. "My wife just used the toilet and it wouldn't stop. Is that right, Lola?"

"That's all I did," said Lola.

Chauncey heard the lid being lifted off the tank.

"Jesus!" came the plumber's gravelly voice. And then, "Jee-sus! I never seen nothin' like this!" More tinkering. "Jee-sus! Unbelievable!"

Five minutes later, Lola called for a maid to mop the bathroom floor. She sat on one of the beds, her soaking shoes in one hand, a towel in the other, trying to dry them. Chauncey was rolling up his cuffs when the phone rang. He answered it.

"Chaunce?" said Willis's voice.

"Yeah."

"Hi, buddy! Whatcha doing?"

"Oh, nothing much," said Chauncey, a forced smile on his face. "Just sitting around watching the toilet flush."

"The toil—are you kidding, or what?"

"No, no," said Chauncey pleasantly. "It's been flushing around—oh, altogether, about an hour now, wouldn't you say, hon?"

Lola merely looked straight ahead.

"Kinda like a tiny little Niagara Falls," said Chauncey.

"Gee," said Willis. "That's too bad. Do you and Lola want to use our john?"

"Oh, no," said Chauncey casually. "No, we're very adaptable. We're just going to wait till we get back to Chicago, that's all."

From the bathroom came, "Jee-sus! I can' unnerstand this. I mean, I been aroun' fer—Jee-sus!"

"Hey," said Willis, "I got the tennis court for ten o'clock tomorrow morning. Is that okay?"

"That's fine," said Chauncey. "Sneakers will be a little damp, but you don't mind, do you?"

Lola took a deep breath. "Ask him what time we're going to the Greek restaurant."

"Lola wants to know what time we're going to the Greek restaurant," relayed Chauncey. "All she's been talking about the whole trip is *moussaka* and *dolmades* and *baklava*. She really craves the stuff."

"Oh, didn't I tell you?" said Willis. "Bettina felt like Japanese, so I booked the Fujiyama for seven-thirty. Meet you in the lobby at seven-fifteen—and don't be late now, you hear?" Willis hung up the phone.

The veins stood out in Chauncey's neck. "Kill him," he whispered. "That man will never get back to Chicago alive!"

In the bathroom, the plumber worked methodically away.

Papa Karl was not encouraged. He'd snooped around all over—The Health Club, the pool, the barber shop, tennis courts, Polo Lounge, lobby—and still there was no sign of the black men who'd gypped him out of four hundred dollars. He even tried walking through the corridors for a half-hour, but his efforts were fruitless. He knew they were there, but how to find them? He tried the front desk.

"Say, you could help me maybe, ya?" he said to the clerk.

"Do my best," said the clerk in bored tones.

"Lookink for a man . . ." Papa read the name from the paper on which he'd copied down the license information. "Dr. Villis Pa-na-ma. I know he iss here, but I would like to know hiss room."

"I'm sorry," said the clerk. "We're not allowed to give out that type of information."

Papa frowned. "Oh, ya, sure, I see. You think maybe, I am bill collector, ya? Or police? But no, iss not so. Chust opposite, in fact. I have, for him, goot news. Hiss car, see, vass in accident, but other party hass agreed to settle. Zey vant to giff him four thousand dollars, and forget everythink. I am Herr Doctor Pa-na-ma's insurance achent, and I am sure he iss anxious and happy to get news."

The clerk's face brightened momentarily. He looked at the chunk of concrete that Willis had given him, still in the garbage pail. He shrugged and smiled. "Awfully sorry," he said. "But my hands are tied."

Papa nodded disconsolately and wandered through the lobby. And then, suddenly, he had an idea. He went out the front entrance and headed for the parking lot. There were hundreds of cars, but they were neatly arranged, and besides, the one he was interested in would stand out quite clearly. Within ten minutes, Papa was alongside it, his hand on the dented front fender. The

Panama station wagon. He looked around furtively, made sure everything was clear, then lay down and slid under the wagon. *Big American bomb uff a car*, he thought. *Provides plenty uff cover*. Once underneath he got out his special multi-function Alpine utility knife that he'd purchased last year in Garmisch-Partenkirchen. It had blades for everything, including cutting, piercing, filing, scraping, and sawing. It was compact, easy to use, and inexpensive. Papa loved his knife. It was the sawing blade that he needed on this particular occasion, and he started in on the brake cable to the left front wheel. True, it was steel-sheathed, and true, there were three other wheels, but Karl Machtinger, if nothing else, was a patient man. He hummed a little polka while he worked. Why, he'd be through before you could say *Geschwindigkeitsgrenze!*

The upper level of the airport terminal was densely crowded with disembarking passengers as Marvin headed out toward the baggage area. For a moment he stopped and stood on tiptoe to see over the heads of the throng and try to spot his brother, who should've been there to meet him. No luck. Too many people. He resumed walking, running one of his hands around in back of him and feeling in his rear pocket to check his wallet. He remembered what Millie had told him: airports are full of thieves and pickpockets. Keep alert. He shifted his raincoat to his other arm (Millie said it rained a lot in Los Angeles), smoothed his brown tweed suit and knitted tie (both of which Millie had selected), and hurried ahead.

Suddenly, from out of the crowd, a voice: "Hey, Marvin! Hey, Marrrviiin!" And then a jovial man emerged from somewhere near a wall; he waved as he came forward, smiling, mid-fortyish, wearing a striped green jogging suit.

"Harry!" said Marvin warmly, rushing toward him.

The two men embraced for half a minute before pulling back.

"Jesus," said Marvin, "you got so bald! How'd you get so bald?"

"You don't see your brother in five years, and that's all you've got to say? 'How'd you get so bald?'"

Marvin shook his head. "I didn't know it was you, you got so bald."

"Oh," said Harry. He pretended to wipe his brow. "For a minute there, I was worried I was losing it. You see how the baldness is receding near the temples, how the hair is starting to grow in?"

Marvin actually looked.

"Come on," said Harry, taking Marvin's raincoat and hand luggage as they started to walk. "Hey, where's Millie?"

"She's coming on the morning plane. We don't like to fly together on account of the kids." Marvin paused. "Boy, you got bald."

"It's the good life out here," said Harry.

Just then they passed two blue-uniformed stewardesses. Marvin got a whiff of musk-accented perfume, glimpsed a swirl of tanned faces, protuberant breasts, long, stockinged legs disappearing into short skirts that flared over rounded buttocks.

"Hey, Marvin . . . take a gander," said Harry.

"Good," said Marvin.

"I'd give up two years of my life," said Harry, "for one hour with each of them."

"Still haven't changed, have you?"

"Let's say hello," said Harry. "Let's see how far we get." He started after the stews.

Marvin grabbed Harry's arm and spun him around. "Will you— Don't start with me, Harry. I'm here one night without Millie, don't get me into trouble."

Harry grinned and patted Marvin on the cheek. "Would I do that to you?"

"You did it to Poppa when he was eighty-two years old; don't do it to me."

Marvin remembered. The woman had been in her forties, and somehow Harry had persuaded her to come over and see Daddy when their mother was out shopping. Fortunately, the old man couldn't get out of his wheelchair, but even so, their mother had been fighting mad on her sudden return. "I want a divorce!" she'd screamed. "Gigolo! What do you see in that hussy?" Poppa, nearly blind from diabetes, could hardly see at all, much less carry on an affair. Six months later he was dead, the incident almost (but not quite) forgotten.

Marvin and Harry walked toward the baggage area, Harry still twisting to get a rear view of the stewardesses.

"Stop looking at the girls," said Marvin. "Your kid's getting bar mitzvahed tomorrow."

Harry shrugged. "What's one thing got to do with the other?"

11

Diana strode directly across the lobby and into the Polo Lounge, with Sidney reluctantly following.

"Where are you going?" he whispered urgently. "*The car is waiting.*"

"I need another drink," said Diana. "The last one wore off coming down in the lift." She crossed to the bar and seated herself on a stool.

That was one thing about Diana, thought Sidney. It didn't bother her at all to keep someone cooling his heels. It was, he guessed, one benchmark of an important person.

"Gin and tonic," Diana told the bartender.

Sidney sat down beside her. "Nothing for me," he said. He looked at his watch. "I heard if you're late, they put nondescript people in your seats."

"Do you know what I might do next year, Sidney?"

Sidney closed his eyes. "Become a Trappist nun?"

"Close."

"I pray, anything but Ibsen."

"I might give it all up," said Diana. "It isn't fun any more." She turned to face him as the bartender stirred her drink. "How I envy you! You're the one with all the talent, and I'm the one who has to make a horse's ass of myself."

"Talent?" said Sidney. "What talent do I have?"

"You have nothing but talent," said Diana. "You cook better than I do. You write better than I do. And God knows, you dress better than I do."

Sidney took a cracker from a little dish and dipped it into what he assumed was a baked-clam spread. "Better than *I*," he said priggishly. "The *do* is superfluous."

"And you speak better than I do," said Diana.

"As well as listen . . ."

"Sidney, what is that green slime you're eating? It looks like a dish out of *Oliver Twist*."

"I'm not sure," said Sidney, holding a cracker out to examine. "I think they ran the front lawn through a blender."

"It's making me sick," said Diana.

"Really?" said Sidney, putting the cracker in his mouth. "Why don't you consider cutting down on it, then?"

Diana frowned. "You have that glazed look in your eyes again, dear. That 'bored-with-her-life' expression."

"Must be the dip," said Sidney. "I'm never bored with your life, angel. I love the parties, the openings. I lead a very gay existence. Let's be honest, pet, how many antique dealers get to go to the Academy Awards?"

Diana was staring at him. "And I think you hate that dusty little shop. Yes, you do, don't you? You're never there when I call, and—"

A man tapped her on the shoulder, fiftyish, in a business suit. He held out a napkin and a ballpoint pen. "Could I, Miss Barrie? It's for my daughter."

Diana took the items coldly and laid them on the bar. "What's her name?"

"Just say, 'To Frank.' "

Diana tried writing, but no ink came out. "Doesn't work," she said, handing back the pen.

The man shook his head. "Jesus, I don't . . . On TV they show this thing penetrating four inches of steel."

"Fine," said Diana. "Save it for when you need an antitank weapon. In the meantime, get a pencil."

The man slunk away, and she turned back to Sidney. "Where do you spend your afternoons?" she asked.

"In London?" said Sidney. "I don't think we *have* afternoons." He leaned over the bar. "Check, please!"

Three floors up, Chauncey and Lola stood on their respective beds. Lola held a mirror in front of her with one hand, while she attempted to comb her hair with the other. Chauncey had turned to face the wall so that the chambermaid, who was mopping the wet floor, would not notice him zipping up his fly.

"I think I got it stopped," said the plumber from the bathroom. "Jesus, I never hoid of nothin' like this. No one would even believe this if I tell 'em. Oh, by the way, you won't be able to use the water in the bathroom for a while."

"That's okay," yelled back Chauncey. "We got enough on the floor here to last us."

Diana lingered in the lobby, and Sidney had given up trying to rush her. Obviously, the dawdling was filling one of her deep, crazy, psychic needs.

"You never should have given it up, Sidney," she said.

"What?"

"Acting. Christ, you were good! You had more promise than any of us."

Sidney thought of his brief stint on the London stage. A few good reviews, a few decent parts in works by new and largely unknown playwrights, too few pounds and shillings at the end of each week to ever call it a career.

"Really?" he said now. "I can't think what it was I promised." He looked at his watch. "If you win and we're still on the freeway, I'm going to be very upset."

"You were so gentle on the stage," said Diana. "So unselfish, so giving—"

"Please stop the rubbish."

"It is not rubbish," said Diana. "You had a sweet, gentle quality."

"Yes, I would have made a wonderful Ophelia," said Sidney.

Diana looked at him sharply. "You could go back if you wanted to."

"I don't think so."

"We could do plays together, have more time for each other."

"To do what?" It was too late, the words were out. His regret would not mitigate the hurt they caused.

"You close off any possibilities, then?" asked Diana softly.

"Oh, there'd be problems," said Sidney. "It would be awful if we were both up for the same part."

Diana shook her head. "Flippant," she said. "The mood for all occasions. But it's a cover, isn't it?"

"I've been that way since childhood. Teachers would tell my mother, and all parties would lament. It's no cover, it's me. Life is too important to take seriously."

"It's too important to avoid, and that's what your flippancy really accomplishes. I made a proposal; I'd like a straight answer. Would you consider returning to the theater?"

Sidney stared at the floor, then looked up. "No,

angel, I would not. I'm perfectly happy selling my eighteenth-century door knockers."

Diana headed for the hotel entrance. Sidney caught up with her outside, at the waiting limousine. "You still haven't told me what you do with your afternoons," she said.

"Oh, I did, darling," said Sidney. "I told you quite clearly. I look for knockers."

The chauffeur held open the door.

Bettina craned her neck. "Did you see her?"

"Huh?" said Willis. He looked again at his watch and compared it with the small electric clock behind the reservations desk in the lobby.

"Diana Barrie," said Bettina. "She just left. I bet she was going to the Academy Awards."

"Oh, sure," said Willis. "Some people actually leave, others just stand and wait." He balled his fists. "Can you believe this? Twenty minutes late. The man is twenty minutes late. How'd you like to be lying on the operating table with tubes in your nose, waiting for *him* to show up?"

Marvin strained to see in the dim light. He had never really been to such a place (though of course he'd heard of them). Certainly he'd never been to such a place this early in the evening. *That* was disturbing, almost as much as the thought of his luggage outside in the trunk of Harry's car.

"Harry," he said, leaning across the table, "I'd really like to get to the hotel."

Harry grinned wolfishly. "You would? Why?" He nodded slyly in the direction of the bar. There, on top, two completely naked girls were dancing to rock music.

"It's just, I always like to unpack first," said

Marvin. "Wherever I go, I unpack, lie down a little while, then I start whatever I'm gonna start. Otherwise, I can't relax."

"You're too orderly, Marvin," said Harry. "Just drink your drink, watch the bouncing boobies, and then you'll relax." He finished his own drink and signalled the waitress.

"I can't relax unless I unpack," insisted Marvin.

"Later," said Harry. "We'll grab some dinner, unwind, and I'll drive you over to the hotel." He looked again at the bar. "Watch that brunette, the little one. See when she bends to—there, there! You see it?"

Marvin glanced up nervously from his drink. "Where?"

"Ah, you missed it," said Harry. "All right, don't worry." He smiled. "She'll do it again. It's just when she bends over, you—"

"I never liked those gynecological views," said Marvin. "They always make me dizzy. I mean, aren't you embarrassed? These girls are so young."

"Embarrassed?" said Harry. "I should be embarrassed. Why should I be embarrassed? Boy, you really are—Marvin, these are all college girls here. They *like* what they're doing. They like it, and I like it, and you should like it. Embarrassment is not an issue here."

"You can't tell me they like it," said Marvin.

He drained his Scotch and water just as a waitress came over. She was a small blond, naked except for thin bikini panties, through which, even in the dim light, Marvin could see a black pubic triangle.

"Another round," said Harry.

The waitress nodded and turned to leave.

"Oh, wait a minute," said Harry. "Wait just a minute. My brother here has a question he'd like to ask you."

"Harry," whined Marvin.

"Go ahead," said Harry expansively. "She doesn't mind." He turned to the waitress. "Do you mind?"

"Not at all."

"See," said Harry, "she said, 'Not at all.'" To the waitress, he said, "I bet you're a college girl, is that right?"

"Yes, I am."

"See that," said Harry. "What'd I tell you." He asked the girl, "Anthropology major at Berkeley?"

"Communications. The Berkeley part is right, though."

Harry reached into his pocket, found a dollar bill, and stuck it in the waistband of her panties.

"Thank you, sir."

Harry nodded and lit a cigar. "How come," he said, "they're nude on the bar, but you girls gotta wear underpants?"

"Management policy, I believe, sir," said the waitress courteously. "Avoids certain legal confrontations."

"Legal confr—" Harry guffawed. "You hear that, Marvin? You hear what she said? Marvie, come on. She's a communications major. She's here, waiting. Communicate!"

Marvin, who had tried desperately to keep his eyes off the girl's crotch and large breasts with their prominent nipples, raised his eyes shyly. This was ridiculous, he thought. He was a man of the world, why should he feel like this? "I . . . was just wondering," he said haltingly, "if you liked . . . uh . . . your work."

"Oh, yes," the girl answered immediately. "Oh, sure! A lot better than typing or filing, that's certain."

Marvin nodded slowly, as if pondering some philosophical truth.

"Say, when do you get off?" asked Harry, again flashing the shark-like smile.

The waitress smiled back. "When my boyfriend and I make out," she said.

"When—ohh, so you've heard that before," said Harry. "All right, you're a nice girl. Go get our drinks." She smiled and left.

"You're amazing," said Marvin, relieved. "It must be true. Bald men are bald because they're oversexed."

Harry shrugged. "It's possible. Hey, is that why you still got all your hair? Is the opposite also true?"

"Oh, I enjoy watching the women," said Marvin. "Don't get me wrong. Only I'd enjoy it more if I were unpacked."

Harry raised his eyebrows. "Watching? You enjoy watching? The ladies, you said?"

"The women."

Harry nodded. "The women. That's good, Marv. I'm glad to hear that. Because I'm gonna show you some really terrific places. You tell me what you like, I take you. We're gonna eat, drink, and be merry."

The waitress arrived with their Scotches, and Marvin turned his gaze to the floor.

"Now, I know," said Harry. "You like 'em a wee bit older, huh? Yeah. I see it. All right, we finish here, we'll hit a place they got chicks in their late twenties. A little riper, you know? A little more mellow." He lifted his drink. "To the ladies," he said.

Self-consciously, Marvin raised his glass.

Chauncey emerged into the corridor with his vest still unbuttoned. Lola locked the door and adjusted an earring on the way to the elevator.

"Your brother's going to pay for this," said Chauncey. "I'm through being nice to that man. Next time I take his X-rays, wait'll he hears what I'm going to find on them!"

He walked very rapidly through the hall, and Lola strained to keep up. "My feet are still wet," she said. "The foot powder is turning into concrete."

Chauncey pressed the "Down" button. "Nine Japanese restaurants in ten nights . . ." The elevator came and he strode in before the door was fully open. "I am sick and disgusted," he said, "of stepping in my stocking feet on the raw fish that *he* drops on the floor."

Two elderly women, already in the car, stared at him as Lola lingered in the corridor.

"Now will you come on, woman," said Chauncey. "This is Pearl Harbor night!"

Lola got on, and they rode to the ground floor in simmering silence.

In the lobby, when they met the Panamas, Willis looked exaggeratedly at his watch and shook his head. As the four of them headed for the entrance, Willis asked, "What were you doing up there? A heart transplant?"

"Something far more delicate," said Chauncey. "Open-toilet surgery. Unfortunately, the patient lost a lot of fluid."

Outside, the sun had sunk from view. "Boy's bringing the car," said Willis. "At least I had the foresight to arrange that."

Chauncey scowled. A moment later, the station wagon pulled up in front of them and came to a bouncing halt. "You oughta get this checked," said the boy as he got out. He held open the door.

"I had water put in the radiator," said Willis. "You mean something else is wrong?"

"What's the problem now?" said Chauncey.

"Nothing," said Willis. "No problem. Can we get going, please? I'll drive."

"You'll what?"

Willis put his hands on his hips. "Do you know where Fujiyama is? No! So I'll drive."

"Last time you drove, you led us to the rear fender of a Buick," Chauncey said.

"Listen," said Bettina, "why don't you two argue in the back? I'll drive."

Willis nodded. "Okay, honey."

Chauncey quickly grabbed Lola by the shoulders. "He said it! Did you hear? He said it! When he says, 'Okay, honey,' it's time to *take cover!* We know. We know from experience."

The boy who had brought their car stared at them.

The scene in front of the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion was the same as always: the excited hordes of people watching from the newly erected stands; the expensive cars pulling up one after the other to disgorge expensive passengers, who then made their way down the red carpet to where Army Archerd was conducting the interviews.

But, of course, thought Diana, no matter how many times you see it on television, it's not really the same as when you're in it. The white Rolls in which she rode moved ahead a few more feet. She leaned forward, saw several dozen fans waving at her through the window, and immediately snapped back.

"I feel like a caged animal, Sidney," she said. "They look as though they're going to throw peanuts at us."

"Tell them I prefer cashews," said Sidney.

"Really, it's frightening."

"Nonsense, darling," said Sidney. "They're just ogling us. I adore being ogled, don't you?"

Their Rolls pulled up to the red carpet, and a tuxedoed man opened their door.

"Sidney!" said Diana.

"Yes?"

"Kiss me. Kiss me and wish me luck."

Sidney leaned over and kissed her on the cheek. Lipstick had to remain undamaged, of course. "There's

your kiss," he said. "Now turn around so I can rub your hump for luck."

"Sidney! Please be nice to me—I'm scared to death."

Sidney, who had begun to get out of the car, stopped and settled back. He took Diana's hands in his own, and when he spoke his voice had a great deal of feeling, surprising even him. "I wish you everything. I wish you luck, I wish you love, I wish you happiness. You're a gifted and remarkable woman. You've put up with me and my shenanigans for twelve harrowing years and I don't know why. But I'm grateful. May—"

"Oh, Sidney, you—"

"Don't interrupt. May the members of the Academy of Arts and Sciences see the beauty, the talent, and the courage that I have seen for a quarter of a lifetime. I hope you win the bloody Oscar. . . ."

"Oh, love—"

"Fifty years from now I'll be able to sell it for a fortune."

Sidney leaned over once again and kissed her, this time on the neck. Then he got out of the car, looked around for a moment, and reached back inside.

"I can't," said Diana.

"Just hold my hand, angel," he said.

Shaking, Diana gripped his forearm and pulled herself out of the car. "Ladies and gentlemen of the Academy," she said quietly, "I thank you for this award. I have a lump in my throat and a hump on my dress."

A press agent ushered her and Sidney up toward the podium. As she walked along the red carpet, the crowd began to cheer.

12

Only a few miles away, on Santa Monica Boulevard, another crowd had formed to watch something at least as fascinating as movie stars exiting limousines. People stood on the sidewalk and in the gutter, prevented only by the ring of flares and the line of cops from approaching closer to the accident. Special portable floodlights had been brought in for illumination, perversely lending a movie-set atmosphere to the proceedings. But this was no movie set. This was simply a bizarre and appalling mishap that had come very close to being a disaster.

Lieutenant Udowitz pushed his way through the crowd. He was a heavy-set man in his late forties, and he was smoking a small but very fat cigar. He approached one of the young patrolmen standing near the open truck.

"All right, what happened here?"

"Three-oh-nine, lieutenant," said the patrolman briskly.

Udowitz removed his cigar from his mouth. "Don't give me numbers, damn it. What do I look like, a cash register? Talk English."

The patrolman nodded. "Okay, see the car on bottom? Under the truck?"

Udowitz squinted. "You mean the station wagon?"

"Yeah. I mean, yes, sir. It looks like the wagon struck the truck and broke both of the restraining chains."

"Both?"

"Yes, sir."

"Must've been really moving. And then?"

"Then about five out of the twelve cars the truck was carrying began to roll backwards out of its rear end."

"It was shitting cars, in other words," said Udowitz.

"Yes, sir."

"Uh-huh." Udowitz gestured toward the wreck. "And the vehicle that's sitting on top of the wagon is one of those new cars that rolled off the truck?"

"Yes, sir."

"Mmm." Udowitz dropped his cigar and crushed it under his foot. "And how long before they can clear the wreckage? They give you an estimate?"

"I believe they said several hours, sir, although I hear now they're trying to bring in another crew."

Udowitz shielded his eyes from the smoky glare of the acetylene torches. He looked around at the crowd. "See them people? This is the happiest moment of their lives. They see a good accident like this, it makes their day. Course, they'd feel a little differently if it was their mother or their boyfriend laying crushed to death in that wreck. Which reminds me. How many people in that wagon?"

"Four, sir."

"Stolen car, or what?"

"Rented."

Udowitz nodded. "Chicanos, probably."

"No, sir."

"What, then? Chinks? I'll bet they were Chinks, down here from Frisco. Leave it to the Chinks to do something crazy like this."

The patrolman didn't answer.

"Were they Chinks?" said Udowitz after a while.

"No, sir."

"No, sir," mumbled Udowitz. "Then what were they?" he yelled. "This ain't no damn guessing game here! There's four dead people laying in that wagon and I'm tryin' a identify 'em. Now what were they?"

The patrolman looked down. "They're blacks, sir." And in a wee voice, "And they're not dead."

"What!"

"Not dead, sir," repeated the patrolman, his voice still tiny.

Udowitz's face turned to stone. His cop's sense of the order of things had been offended. Cause and effect. Crime and punishment. Speeders got into accidents and killed themselves.

"Not even injured," whispered the patrolman.

Udowitz's lips pressed together until they were white. "I want your name," he said to the patrolman.

They sat this time in a small booth.

"I think I'm seeing double," said Marvin. "I can't drink any more."

"This is the next-to-last place," said Harry. "I promise. And you're not seeing double. Those girls are twins. Their brother had to take a second job just to keep them in bras. Obviously, he hasn't succeeded."

Marvin could feel the numbness creeping up through his cheeks. "Remember when me, you, and Barry Sokolov pissed on the roof of Noodleman's bakery?"

Harry chuckled warmly. "Yeah, yeah. Around two a.m., wasn't it? We were, what, seventeen, sixteen?"

"That was fun," said Marvin.

"The best actress is . . ." said Burt Reynolds, smiling as he tore open the envelope. He paused, while the audience held its breath. "Burt Reynolds!"

There were some tinkles of laughter.

"Didn't like that one, huh?" said Reynolds. "All right, try this on. The best actress is . . ."

"I'm dying," said Diana. Her fingers dug into Sidney's forearm like claws. "I'm having a nervous breakdown here."

"I'm having a hemorrhage on my arm," said Sidney.

"If he doesn't announce the real winner now, I'm going up there and strangle him."

"Calm now," said Sidney. "I think you're into the bone."

"The best actress is," repeated Reynolds, "right here in Hollywood, it's . . ."

The patrolman wrote carefully in his notebook. He was bent over, and most of his illumination still came from the blue-white aura produced by the high-temperature combination of oxygen and acetylene.

"And when you put your foot on the brakes," he asked again, "you say nothing happened?"

"I didn't say nothing happened," said Bettina. "I said the brakes didn't work. When the brakes didn't work, that's when nothing *good* happened."

"You must have snapped the cables holding the cars," said the patrolman. "Never saw anything like that in my life. Miracle none of you were seriously injured."

In the next seat, Willis cupped his bleeding nose in

his palm. "I thought it was a jet. I thought, 'Oh, God, we've just been hit by a seven-forty-seven.'"

"My legs are paralyzed," said Chauncey from the back seat. And then, louder, "They're paralyzed!"

"We're trying to get you out as fast as we can," said the policeman.

"It's not the car," said Chauncey despairingly. "It's from sitting in that Japanese restaurant."

"Just hold tight," said the policeman. "I'll get you some coffee." He squeezed out from under the overhanging car and yelled to the masked workmen. "Come on, you guys! Hey, hurry that up, will ya?"

"If he was gettin' time-and-a-half like we were," mumbled one of the workmen, "he wouldn't be in such a rush. You don't hear the people in the car complainin'."

Willis leaned out the window. "Hey, don't take the car on top away. We can use it as a spare."

"See that," said the workman. "Guy's probably a union man."

"I want to go home," said Lola. "I want to go home so bad."

"This trip was jinxed," said Willis. "You set off on Friday the thirteenth, you got a jinxed trip."

"I remember," said Chauncey, "when I was a kid, my mama always hated when I went in the gutter. She was afraid someday I'd be run over." He grunted as he stretched out a leg. "I bet she never thought I'd be run over like this."

The car went up the driveway and stopped in front of the entrance to the Beverly Hills Hotel. Marvin opened the door and staggered out.

"What about—" He giggled uncontrollably. "Where are you? Hello-oh? Peekaboo." He steadied himself on the car. "Calling Harry. Come in, please. Do you read me, Herschel?"

Harry peered slyly out of the driver's window, then leaped out of the car. The two of them laughed hysterically.

"Don't forget," said Harry. "Don't forget your . . . your . . . don't . . ." He dissolved in a helpless fit of mirth. After a moment, he stumbled around to the rear of the car, unlocked the trunk, and managed somehow to remove his spare tire. "Your suitcase," he said, rolling it to Marvin.

Marvin nodded. "Thank you, good fellow. You like the shape of my bag? Convenient for travel, convenient to store, made of genuine carhide." He pulled back the hand he had been using to steady the tire. It was covered with brownish dirt. He put the hand to his nose and inhaled.

"Is it?" said Harry.

"Yes," said Marvin casually. "A minor disadvantage of this type of luggage. It accumulates shit in the treads."

"Really?" said Harry, cackling madly. "You mean you actually. . . ? Listen, can we skip the handshake tonight?"

"Oh, come on," said Marvin. "What about—what about that night up in the Catskills when you ran away, and you came back home an hour later because you stepped in cow doo-doo? Who do you think cleaned your shoes?"

"You mean you . . . even then—" Once more, they both collapsed in a paroxysm of giggles.

Finally, Marvin collected himself. "Oh jeez, that was funny. That really was." He looked around. "Boy, I am really tanked, Harry. Is this the right hotel?"

"You're asking me?" said Harry. "Me? Don't ask me. I'm blind."

Marvin nodded and walked over to his brother. "Hey, booby, thanks for a terrific evening." He kissed Harry on the lips.

"I got scared there for a minute," said Harry. "I thought you were gonna pat me on the back." He hoisted Marvin's suitcase out of the car's trunk. "Here, tell me what this one has on it."

Marvin looked at him. "I mean it. I haven't enjoyed myself this much in . . . in a long time. Thank you."

"Thank me in the morning," said Harry. "The night's not over yet."

"What do you mean? What are you smiling about? Heh?"

"Sleep well, kid. And don't forget to leave an early wake-up call." Harry walked around to the front of the car, got in, and closed the door. "Enjoy," he said, chuckling. "Enjoy."

Harry drove off.

Marvin stood there without moving. "What are you talking about? What's going on, Harry?"

In a moment, he picked up his suitcase, leaving the spare tire where it lay in front of the entrance. "I don't trust him," he muttered. "Something's going on here, I know it."

He went into the hotel.

There were perhaps eight people in the entire ballroom. Diana and Sidney were two of them, the last two at their particular table.

"Come on," said Sidney. "It's after three."

"Don't give me that superior-than-thou crap," said Diana. "Just don't."

Sidney reached over to take her hand.

"And don't touch me, either!" said Diana, swiftly withdrawing it.

"You *are* stinking," said Sidney sadly. "Aren't you?"

"Don't talk to me like that. I'm a lady. A loser and a lady. One of the great losing ladies of the cinema."

The patrolman led the four of them to the waiting taxi. The work crews still labored with crowbars and acetylene torches, even though a tow truck and special crane were standing by to help.

"Now don't forget to notify your insurance company," said the policeman to Willis.

"We're old hands at this," said Willis. "We know the ropes."

"Good night," said the cop.

"Good night," said Lola.

"Thank you," said Bettina.

Chauncey waved. "See you tomorrow probably."

They entered the cab.

"I am so exhausted," said Lola.

Bettina nodded. "I'm dead."

Chauncey yawned. "It's going to feel good to get into a nice warm puddle and go to sleep."

"You're not calling off the tennis match, are you?" said Willis.

Chauncey glared at him. "Did America call off World War Two?"

Back at the scene of the accident, a workman walked over to Lieutenant Udowitz. In his palm was a cable, which he held under the beam of a floodlight. "Thought you'd want to see this," he said. "Brake line to the front left wheel."

Udowitz took it in his beefy hand. "So?"

"Don't it look like it was cut?" said the workman.

Udowitz scoffed and looked up to the nighttime sky. "Everyone's Columbo nowadays," he said. "Stop watching so much TV." Sabotage, he thought, is one way black people *don't* try to kill each other.

The workman returned to his coffee break.

It took Marvin three tries to get the key into the door, another two to turn it and simultaneously twist the doorknob. Somehow he managed to drag the suitcase in behind him after crossing the threshold. He switched on the light, was briefly, if foggily, impressed by the size and décor of the living room, then strode quickly to the darkened bedroom. *God, he thought, I am wiped out.* Smashed to smithereens. He kicked off his shoes, slipped quickly out of his shirt and pants, climbed into the near side of the bed, and stretched out. He was just barely beginning to doze when suddenly the light over the night table on the other side switched on.

"Oh!" said Marvin, startled. He sat up.

Next to him in the bed, also sitting up, the sheet held just below her bare shoulders, was the most beautiful redhead Marvin had ever seen. She was in her late twenties, and she was smiling.

"Hi!" she said.

"Wha—" said Marvin.

"I'm Bunny!"

The girl let the sheet drop away on one side, revealing a rounded, melon-sized breast capped by a lovely pink nipple.

"*Holy Christ!*" said Marvin.

"Happy birthday from your brother Harry!"

"My birthday?" muttered Marvin, blinking. "My birthday isn't until next month." He realized now that he must be dreaming, and so gradually he began to relax. It must have been all those topless-bottomless places that had led his subconscious to produce such a fantasy, he thought.

"I'm in no hurry," said Bunny.

She slid back down under the sheets and looked at Marvin temptingly. She wet her lower lip with her tongue. Marvin noticed a full bottle of tequila on the night table next to her.

"What a thoughtful thing of Harry to do," he said, smiling shyly at Bunny.

It wasn't until he'd spent more than three minutes beneath the covers, when her feverish kisses were getting down to his abdomen, that he finally understood that this—however unlikely, however ecstatically and thrillingly unbelievable—was no dream.

13

There were now only four people left. At the rear of the ballroom, a waiter was folding chairs.

"I am tired," said Diana. "I would like to take off my hump and go to bed."

She rose, and Sidney rose with her. "Who was that girl you threw up on?" he asked.

They walked slowly toward the exit.

"I beg your pardon?" said Diana.

"I was asking," said Sidney, "who that attractive young girl in the Pucci muu-muu that you threw up on was?"

"How would I know?" said Diana. "I don't bother taking the names and addresses of all those boring people I throw up on. I have very little reason for wanting to see them again." She wobbled slightly, and Sidney put an arm around her for support.

"I hate to be clinical about this," he said, "but

since you had neither lunch nor dinner, nor even a single canapé at the ball, how—”

“What were you, following me around?”

“—how could you possibly find anything to throw up?”

They emerged into the cool night air.

“When you have class,” said Diana, “you can do anything. Oh, by the way, did I tell you I saw what’s-her-name in the ladies’ room?”

“Who?”

“What’s-her-name? The one I saw in the ladies’ room?”

“How would I possibly know?”

“Oh, Christ,” said Diana, exasperated. “You *do* know her.”

“Was it Mrs. Brezhnev?”

“Sidney, she was in the ladies’ room.”

Sidney thought for a moment. “Can you narrow it down a bit more?”

“Barbra!” said Diana suddenly.

“Hochelmeister?”

“Streisand,” said Diana. “She was in the ladies’ room.”

“Singing?” asked Sidney.

“I don’t think so,” said Diana. “There were no requests.”

Sidney nodded. “What was she like?”

“Well, in the ladies’ room,” said Diana, “we’re all pretty much the same.”

Forty minutes later, they were back in their suite at the Beverly Hills Hotel. Diana sat on the couch; Sidney stood near the window.

“You never told me what award I missed when I went to the can,” said Diana.

“You mean the one Barbra also missed?”

“Yes.”

"The best documentary short subject."

"Damn it," said Diana. "My favorite category. Who won?"

"Well, it was a close contest between *All My Fjords* produced by Svenske-Danske Productions and directed by Ulf Mühlmann and Arn Skarsvaag, and *The Midgets of Leipzig*, a Czech-Polish film."

"And?"

"The Czech-Polish production won. Sigmund Wednetski was the producer, and it was directed by Litwell Zumbredowicz and Stefan Vlech."

Diana nodded seriously. "I *thought* they would win. And what was the best picture?"

Sidney walked toward the bedroom. "The best picture? You were there when they announced it."

"I was?" Diana rose from the couch and followed him.

"It came right after Best Actress."

"I was in a deep depression at the time," said Diana. "What was the best bloody picture?"

Sidney took off his shirt. He looked at Diana through narrowed eyes. "You mean, what *was* the best picture of the year, or what did those idiots *pick* as the best picture of the year?"

"What won the award, you asshole?"

Sidney stopped undoing his belt buckle. "I don't believe *You Asshole* won anything," he said. "Was that a Greek production?"

"Damn you," said Diana, "I asked you something!"

Sidney stared at her. "I am not an asshole," he said slowly. "Don't you call me that."

"Sidney . . . I have just thrown up on some of the best people in Hollywood. Al Pacino has my scent all over him. This is no time to get sensitive."

"Who's sensitive?"

"Then what was the best picture?"

Sidney resumed tugging at his belt, finally undoing it. He removed his trousers, folded them neatly, and hung them on a wooden hanger. "I'm not telling you," he said.

"I'm not asking you!" Diana shrieked suddenly. "I'm threatening you . . . you crud!" She was in a drunken fury.

"Now I'm definitely not going to tell you."

"All right," said Diana, fighting for control. "I'm sorry. I take it back, Sidney. You are not a crud. I spoke out of turn."

"Am I still an asshole?"

"Certainly."

"Then I'm *never* telling you!" shouted Sidney. He hung his trousers in the closet. "You are a disgrace," he said calmly. "The princess of puke. You behaved abominably tonight."

"I did not."

"Abominably!"

"Not!"

"A-bom!"

"Asshole crud!"

"You took back the crud!"

"Well, I'm re-issuing it. Crud! Crud!"

Sidney shook his head. "I'm going to sleep. We have a ten a.m. plane to catch in the morning."

"Ten a.m. *is* the morning," said Diana. And then, in a schoolmarmish voice, "*That* is redundant."

"Are you giving a performance now?" said Sidney.

"You A.H.!"

"You think I don't know what you're saying? I can spell."

"Not without moving your lips," said Diana. She sat on the edge of the bed. "I would like another drink, please."

"You drank everything in this state," said Sidney, facing away from her. "Try Nevada."

"Try sucking a rock."

Sidney shook his head. He lowered his shorts. Between his muscular legs, Diana caught a glimpse of his hairy scrotum.

"Oooh, Sidney." She closed her eyes. "I saw your privates."

Sidney stepped into his pajama bottoms. "Remind me to show you my sergeants and lieutenants sometime," he said. He turned to face her, saw the downcast look in her eyes, and felt sorry. "You're right. We never should have come."

"Oh, Sidney—"

"Have you ever seen a greater assemblage of hypocrites under one roof in all your life?"

"Were the hypocrites there?" said Diana. "Why didn't you point them out to me?"

"My index finger would've fallen off," said Sidney. "Hypocritical hypocrites. They all love you and fawn over you on the way in. But if you come out a loser, it's 'Too bad, darling, give us a call when you're back in town.'"

"I'm *never* coming back to town."

"You should have thrown up on the whole bloody lot of them," said Sidney.

Diana stood up and examined herself in the large mirror above the vanity. "Sidney?"

"Yes?"

"Was I hit by a bus?"

"Not that I noticed."

"I look as though I had been hit by a fully loaded guided tour bus."

Sidney paced back and forth. "Did you notice how quickly the winners got their cars? They must have known

beforehand who the winners were in order for them to get their cars before everyone else."

"You're paranoid," said Diana, "but undoubtedly correct."

"We come six thousand miles," continued Sidney, "all for this bloody affair, and they park our car in Vancouver."

"I've aged, Sidney," said Diana, still studying her mirror image. "I'm getting lines in my face. I look like a brand-new steel-belted radial tire."

Sidney was still in a paranoid stew. "Even Litwell Zumbredowicz and Stefan Vlech got their cars before us. They were humming Polish marching songs. And to top it off, the little twerps splashed water on my trousers as they drove by."

Abruptly, Diana turned and headed for the phone. "I'm hungry," she said.

"What are you doing?" asked Sidney. "You can't eat the phone."

Diana lifted the receiver. "I'm calling room service. I want Eggs Benedict." She really was ravenous. "Hello?" she said. "Eggs Benedict, please."

"I remember him," said Sidney.

"What do you mean, what do I mean?" said Diana into the mouthpiece. "You don't know—"

"You have to ask for room service first, twit," said Sidney.

"Room service, please," said Diana. Then, to Sidney, "Twit and a half."

"Oh, we're sharp tonight," he said. "Clever riposte. Touché."

Diana wrinkled her brows. "No room service?" She looked up. "Oh, shit, shit! This is unbelievable." She touched her lips to the mouthpiece. "Are you sure? Isn't there anyone there? I just want some Eggs Benedict." She listened. "I see. No one at all." She shook her head.

"Well then, how about lox, eggs, and onions? Could I get that?" Again, she waited. "Well, can't *someone* make it? Aren't there any maintenance men around? What about the manager?" She shifted the phone to her other ear. "*Well, I don't care if he is allergic to eggs, can't he find someone!*" She nodded. "I see. Thank you. It's just not my night, is it?"

Hanging up, Diana said, "For want of an egg, an actress was lost. Next time I'll tell Joe Pickman to forget about flowers, just send me a basket with a dozen 'best white.'"

"If you're really hungry," said Sidney, "I have some of those anti-acid tablets in my pocket."

Diana didn't answer him. Instead, she picked up her cape and headed out into the living room.

"Where are you going?" Sidney called after her.

"Taking matters into my own hands. I'm heading for their bloody kitchen to make myself some Eggs Benedict. Twit!"

Sidney heard the door of their suite open, then shut. "Twit-ette!" he mumbled after her.

Chauncey awoke with a start. He felt nauseated. He looked around, unable to see a single thing in the darkened room. He felt Lola's warm body cuddled up next to him. At least *she* was here, he thought. Thank God for that. He felt suddenly cold, and his teeth began to chatter. Goose pimples came out on his skin. He began to moan. "Ohhhhhh. Ohhhhhhhh. . . ." He felt Lola stir, watched her come reluctantly awake.

"What's the matter?" she whispered. She propped herself up on one elbow.

"I don't feel so good," said Chauncey.

"What is it?"

"Raw fish and wet feet." He felt the waves of nausea rise in his chest, begin to establish a beachhead

high up in his throat. "I think I'm going to throw up. Yes, I'm positive." He pulled off the covers and sat up straight. His forehead was covered with clammy perspiration. "Stand clear! Back off! Don't move, here it comes."

He scrambled for the bathroom. Lola took one of his arms and partially flung him through the small door. She turned on the bathroom light, then backed away. From inside, she heard the sounds of retching. After five minutes, she called in, "Chauncey? Are you all right?"

No answer.

"Chauncey?"

Looking shaken and breathing heavily, Chauncey stuck his head out the bathroom door. "I hope you weren't planning on taking a bath tonight." He cupped a hand over his mouth. "Excuse me," came his muffled voice through his fingers. He pulled his head back inside.

"I'll see if I can get something for you," said Lola, trying to shut out the retching noises. In her haste to dial the phone, she did not realize that she had missed the first digit, an error that caused her to be connected with the room directly above the one she wanted.

Karl Machtinger stirred in his sleep. He'd been dreaming of his trip last year to the Bavarian Alps, two weeks of delightful skiing, mountain climbing, and best of all, eating. Of course, there was that insolent guide on Mt. Zugspitze, the one whom he'd had to teach a lesson by cutting his safety rope. But except for that single incident, the vacation had been exceptional. A bell was ringing now, and in his stupor, Papa Karl thought that it might be a dinner bell. He, Mama, and *die Kinder* had all dined at the hotel that night, an excellent supper, and then returned to the room to sleep. Just before retiring, Papa had turned on the news on the television, learning first of the important Academy Awards, later on seeing actual pictures of the bizarre accident on Santa Monica Boule-

vard—the one with the new-car truck and the station wagon. Papa Karl had gone to sleep with a full belly and a contented mind. But now, what was this ringing? Gradually, he swam up out of the murky depths of unconsciousness. Phone. Cheesus! Someone wass calling. At ziss hour yet!

His hand reached out and lifted the receiver.

“Ya?”

“Oh, Will? Lola. Look, those six hours we spent in the car have really gotten to Chauncey. I hate—”

“Who iss this?”

“Is this Willis? Dr. Willis Panama?”

“No,” said Papa Karl, fully awake now, and irate. “No ziss iss not ‘Villis’! Ziss iss Karl Machtinger. Und you are not frighdening me. I keep teaching you a lesson till you learn. Maybe tomorrow you von’t be ass lucky ass tonight, hmm?” And with that, Papa Karl hung up.

Lola shook her head and re-dialed, this time correctly. One floor below the Machtingers, Bettina came awake suddenly as the phone rang. She sat up in bed, while Willis moaned sleepily beside her.

“Who could that be at this hour?” said Bettina.

Willis took a deep breath. “Who do you *think*? Strike It Rich went off the air twenty years ago. It’s *them*. Their game plan is to see we don’t get any sleep.” He rolled over and turned on the light, then reached for the phone.

“Hello?” He looked up, smirking. “Whaddaya know, it’s Lola. Yeah, Lola, what’s up?” He listened. “Chauncey’s supper,” he repeated. “No kidding? In the tub? Aw . . . look, tell him to take a couple of compid spansules.” He paused another moment, then shook his head. “Now? I don’t make house calls when I’m working, why should I do it on vacation? I know, I know. And he

still *is* my best friend. All right, all right, I'll be over as soon as I can."

He hung up and got out of bed. He walked to the closet and searched for some trousers. "He's purposely doing it," he said matter-of-factly. "You think this isn't intentional?"

"Willis, he may really be sick."

"Him? Sick? Oh, no. He's too mean and grubby and nasty to be sick. Even the germs can't stand him. No, this is just one of his tactics. He knows I don't play good without eight hours of sleep." He pulled his pants on over his pajama bottoms. "We'll see. I'll give him some special pills, he won't be able to lift his racket for a week."

"Willis," said Bettina, "don't start in. He'll sue you for malpractice."

"He wouldn't know it if he saw it," said Willis. He grabbed his doctor's bag and started for the door.

Above them, Papa Karl had been listening. Never one to postpone a task, he too had been gathering his tools. A sheet-metal worker by trade, he always brought along the implements of his occupation. Beside him on the floor were a center punch, a small electric drill, an assortment of bits, shears—and, of course, the jar of concentrated nitric acid that Papa usually diluted and used to etch precise, complicated shapes into thin laminates of brass or beryllium copper. Dangerous stuff, that acid. And Papa's hands and fingers were covered with the characteristic yellow-orange burn marks to prove it.

He worked now in semi-darkness, using only the light from the bathroom so as not to disturb his sleeping family. Mama was snoring peacefully, her ruddy cheeks puffing in and out with each stertorous breath. Papa smiled briefly as he plugged in the drill.

Marvin and Bunny were fast asleep, although for slightly different reasons.

Marvin had passed out almost immediately after his second orgasm, which had occurred about thirty-five minutes after his first orgasm. His first orgasm had occurred about four minutes after finding Bunny next to him under the sheets. Marvin hadn't had two orgasms so close and so fast since he was sixteen years old. Of course, at that age orgasms were a dime a dozen, and Marvin frequently could use up the entire dime's worth in less than three days. Actually, this whole episode had been a fantasy from his youth, and after the initial shock, Marvin had been inclined to accept it as a mere existential experience—without meaning, without morality, not subject to rational analysis. He had simply given himself over to sensory expression. Warm, pulsing, rubbing, clinging, wriggling, pressing, pounding, wet, shuddering collapsing flesh—and it was over. They hadn't spoken five words.

Marvin sat bolt upright. "*Mildred!*" His heart was beating a mile a minute. He looked around the darkened room, managed to discern Bunny's shape beneath the sheets next to him. "Oh, Jesus," he said aloud. "I must have been having a nightmare." He sank back down to the pillow and draped his arm around Bunny's shoulder. "I thought it was my wife," he said sleepily. "Don't forget to close the door on your way out, honey."

Bunny made not a sound. On the end table next to her, the bottle of tequila stood open. And empty.

14

From the living room, there came a crash of glass. Almost immediately, the lights went on in the bedroom. Sidney opened his eyes dazedly and saw Diana standing near the switch.

"I found the people at the awards singularly unattractive this year," she said.

Sidney squinted to make sure who it was. "Christ!" he said.

Diana kicked off her shoes. "I noticed a general decline in face lifts and hair transplants. Must be the economy, don't you think?"

Sidney pulled himself to a sitting position. "Did you get your Eggs Benedict?"

"Bitchy, bitchy, darling," said Diana. "You haven't started anything naughty without me, have you?"

Sidney reached over to the end table, found a pack of cigarettes, and lit one. "I didn't expect to see you until dawn. I heard a few other cats prowling out there."

Diana half closed her eyes. "Well, we're not all as lucky as you, Sidney. You got your prowling in early. Who was he?"

"What are you talking about?" said Sidney annoyedly.

"That adorable young actor you were chatting with all night. Gorgeous, wasn't he?"

"Diana, please . . ."

"Where did you find him?"

I didn't 'find' him, he was at our table. We shared a butter plate."

"How spreadably cozy."

"Careful, darling," said Sidney, now fully awake. "We're tired and smashed. Let's not get into shallow waters."

"Oh, I wasn't aware we were even boating," said Diana. "All right, I'm sorry. Let's just talk show biz. And who did *you* vote for tonight, Sidney?"

Sidney wanted the conversation to end. In this condition, under these circumstances, Diana could be the most miserable living bitch in the world. "I don't vote, dear. I am not a member of the Motion Picture Academy. I am an antique dealer. One day, when you are an antique, I shall vote for you, that's a promise."

"You're evading the question as usual. That's your real area of expertise, isn't it, Sidney? Not old chests, or candelabra, but evasion. That's what you've been doing all these years, haven't you?"

"Methinks I discern a weighted inquiry," said Sidney.

"I meant," said Diana, "who did you vote for privately? In the deep, deep inner twit recesses of your redundant mind?"

"Diana, what say we—"

"When Miss Big Boobs ran up there all teary-

eyed and bouncing flesh, I could feel the tension release from every part of your body."

Sidney exhaled sharply and shook his head. "What a nasty streak you have when you drink." He dragged deeply on his cigarette. "Also when you eat, and sit, and walk," he added.

"Picky, picky, Sidney," said Diana. She slouched against the wall. "Are you unhappy because you didn't get to wear my dress?" She looked at him wickedly.

"If I had worn your dress, darling," said Sidney, "it would have hung properly." He grinned fleetingly. "Nothing personal."

"There never is anything personal with us," said Diana, straightening up suddenly. "Or is that getting too personal?"

Diana knew the tactic would work eventually. Everyone, after all, had his special area of guilt and guilty feelings, and if you picked around there long enough, the protective scab of sweet accommodation fell away and the vile pus of abuse would ooze forth. Tonight, Diana wanted to hurt, and be hurt, because it was the closest she could approach to being loved.

"I was devastated when you lost," Sidney lied reasonably. "But look at it this way. It's just a little bald, naked statue. That's all it is."

"Just like you'll be one day," said Diana.

"Just like we'll all be one day."

"Tell me," said Diana, "did he happen to carve his phone number in the butter patty for you?"

"Oh, go to hell," said Sidney.

He stood up. A fleeting image crossed his mind of himself striking Diana across the face, a whipping, whistling movement, backhanded, that sent her staggering to the other end of the room.

"To hell?" said Diana. "What's this? A direct assault? A frontal attack?"

"You don't know what a frontal attack is," said Sidney grimly. "You wouldn't care for it."

"Oh, that's not like you, Sidney. Wit and parry, wit and parry, that's your style."

"You make me sick," said Sidney.

"Why should you be different?"

"You're a spoiled, infantile, nasty-tempered brat."

"Sticks and stones, et cetera. Also, very gauche." Pick, pick, she thought. It was working.

"When you can't have what you want," said Sidney, "you make certain everyone else around you will be equally miserable."

Diana pretended to look from side to side. "I haven't noticed any equals around me."

"Crude, Diana, that's you. Crude and noxious. It's amazing how you're able to throw up verbally as well as you can nutritionally. It's getting awful distasteful to be anywhere near you."

Damn, Sidney thought. I've been baited into it. That's really what she's after, and now she's tricked me into giving it to her. She wants to be flogged.

"Adam, wasn't that his name?" said Diana. "Yes, I think it was. Adam, the first man. Not very appropriate for you, is it?"

Sidney sat back down on the bed. "Christ, Diana, come off it! We keep up a front for everyone else, why can't we do it for ourselves?"

Diana smiled mirthlessly. "You mean lie to each other that we're perfectly well mated."

"There is a thin line between lying and civilized behavior. Some things are simply better left undiscussed."

"Oh," said Diana, nodding in exaggerated arcs. "Oh, I see, professor. A closet couple, is that what we are, then, Sidney? Does that file us properly?"

"I have never hidden," said Sidney with false calm, "behind closed doors. But I *am* discreet."

"Discreet? You did everything but lick his artichoke. You left more fingerprints on his trousers than his tailor."

"Please let's not have a discretion contest," said Sidney, holding up his hands. "I have heard about your lunch breaks on the set. And it's well known that lunch is not what you eat."

"Twit!"

"Twat!" Sidney went to the end table, removed a small bottle from the drawer, popped two pills into his mouth. "The only thing you don't do in your dressing room is dress."

"And why not? Do you think you have some kind of monopoly on young boys?"

Sidney swallowed twice, the pills going down hard. "Now I've lost count of my Librium. If I'm not up by nine, I've overdosed."

"Perhaps you've *been* overdosing. Do you find people trying to hang you in the closet, along with the coats?"

Sidney did not answer. He wondered if there were any way to shut her engine of abuse, deprive it of its vitriolic fuel.

"Why is he coming to England?" asked Diana after a moment.

"Who?"

"Who?" she mocked. "William the Conqueror! Who? You know who. That boy, of course."

"How do you know he's coming to England?"

"I had a tape recorder in my bra," said Diana. "He said, 'See you in London next week.' What is he doing in London?"

"Perhaps he's servicing the Queen's TV. Or perhaps he's servicing the Queen. Or Prince Charles."

"We both know whom he's going to fix. Except

even you don't exert enough charm to attract someone six thousand miles. So what is attracting him?"

Sidney shrugged. "Acting, of course. He's making a film there."

"Ah, a film," said Diana. "Is it one of those sixteen-millimeter items with two men, two women, a vibrator, three pieces of fruit and no dialogue? Is that the type of acting he does?"

"I wouldn't know."

"Then what? What film?"

Sidney stared at her disdainfully. "I don't follow other people's films. I barely follow yours."

Diana turned and pounded her fist against the wall. "Goddam him and goddam you!" she screamed. "Goddam the Oscars, goddam California! Goddam everything!" She kept up the pounding, until finally she began to sob. "Goddam . . ."

Sidney looked at her dispassionately. "What is there about this climate that brings out the religion in you?"

Diana was making mewling noises; fluid ran from her eyes and nose. Her efforts at stopping it from either place were unsuccessful. "Why don't you love me?" she wailed.

Sidney was unimpressed. "What film was *that* line from?"

Diana spun around, furious. "You bastard, answer the question!"

"Move that the witness be deemed unresponsive, Your Honor."

"Answer!"

"Perhaps even hostile."

"Why don't you love me?"

"That," said Sidney, "does not sound like a question. That is an accusation."

"I am tired—"

"Me too," said Sidney. "The Librium—"

"—of paying for everything and getting nothing back in return."

"I thought it was Joe Pickman who paid for everything and got nothing back in return. And by the way, my mother used to tell me the same thing. Up until I was sixteen, I should guess. Which is when I moved out. Then she didn't have to pay for everything."

"If it wasn't for me, you wouldn't have been here tonight to arrange to meet him next week in London," said Diana. She managed to inhale some mucous back into her nose (a most undignified and unladylike thing to do, Sidney thought), and ran a hand through her hair. "Sidney," she asked wretchedly, "why don't you love me any more?"

Almost, Sidney relented. Almost let down the facade. "I've never stopped loving you," he said quietly, "in my own way."

"*Your* way doesn't do me any good," snapped Diana.

Sidney felt himself tighten up. "It's nearly three o'clock in the morning, Diana, I—"

"Who gives a shit!" yelled Diana.

"—I don't think it's a good time to discuss biological discrepancies."

"Faggot!"

Sidney tensed. "Oh, good, I thought you'd never ask." His face was a hard, expressionless mask.

Diana plopped down into a lounge chair. "Don't walk away from me, Sidney." Her voice softened. "Please."

"Sorry, love, I simply can't turn it on and off as you do. You're a better actress than I am—or was—an actor. Only I think you'd better learn to distinguish between movies and life. I'm not your co-star, and my responses are not dictated by some hack script."

Diana closed her eyes. "I'm so miserable tonight, Sidney. Please don't do this to me."

Sidney looked at her, saw how drained she seemed . . . and how old. "I'm sorry," he said. "It hasn't been a 'winning' evening, has it?"

Diana thrust out her lower lip. "Screw the Oscars! Screw the Academy Awards." Softly, she added, "Screw me, Sidney—please."

Sidney rolled his eyes upward.

"I'm sorry," said Diana quickly. "I didn't mean that. I don't want to put you off your game."

Sidney went over and sat on an arm of her chair. He began to stroke her hair and neck. "I am *always* here for you, Diana."

Diana's mouth fluttered upward in a half smile, and the tears slid silently out of her eyes and down her cheeks. "My friendly filling station . . ."

"We may not service," said Sidney, "but we're tops in caring about our customers."

"Why don't you stick to your own kind, Sidney?"

"I don't like antique dealers."

"And I don't like bisexual homosexuals. Or is it the other way around?"

"It works either way."

Diana reached up to touch his hand. "Jesus God, Sidney, I love you so much."

"I know that, my darling."

"But why do you stay with me?"

"Your name is on the luggage tags," Sidney said.

"What do you get from me that could possibly satisfy you?"

Sidney chuckled. How often he'd asked himself the same question. There was no good answer, really. A great deal of it was simply comfort, and inertia. After twelve years, it was hard to change, hard to carve out new grooves. Better the unhappiness you know than the

misery that might be waiting. And there was a certain amount of freedom, a small space to maneuver.

"I get a wider circle of prospects," he answered. "I am a minor celebrity, once removed." A bit of truth there, too, he thought.

"Sorry I didn't win that award tonight," said Diana. "Your dance card would have been filled for a year."

Sidney scarcely heard. He was concentrating on justifying his existence. A few outright lies, a few rationalizations, a few scrapings of memory from the beginning of their marriage . . . and it was done.

"We haven't done too badly together," he said.

"No," agreed Diana. "I don't think so."

"I'm kinder to you than your average stunt man."

Diana nodded. "True, true enough. We have not had the Hollywood flaming fall-out, the notorious alimony struggle, re-marriage to a rock star, and subsequent sad, quiet, second divorce. We've avoided all that."

"But . . ." Sidney prompted. He kept on with the hair-stroking.

"But there was a time, Sidney"—she was crying now—"when I thought you would give it all up for me."

Sidney shook his head sadly. "It's hard to teach an old dog new tricks."

"I wasn't trying," said Diana. "I'd simply hoped you'd forget the old ones."

"I do love you, my angel," said Sidney. "More than any woman I've ever known."

"Christ," said Diana. "I can't get a break."

A moment passed in silence.

"I do the best I can," said Sidney softly.

"Thank you."

Diana stood up and held out her arms. Sidney embraced her tenderly. "You can't say we don't have fun together," he said.

"Hell, the dinner conversations alone are worth the trouble," she said.

They kissed then, with the warmth and passion that comes only from years of intimate companionship, a kiss of enduring affection that took the place of lust. As they separated for air, Diana yawned.

"I hadn't realized I'd slipped quite that much," said Sidney.

"Oh, I am sorry," said Diana. "It wasn't the kiss, believe me."

"Something else on your mind, then?"

"It was my life," said Diana. His arms were still around her. She pried them gently apart and walked to the bed. "Wake me next summer," she said.

"Tired?"

"No," said Diana. "It's just that I can't move, stand, or keep my eyelids open." She crawled under the covers. "Losing Oscars always does that to me. It's like taking an antihistamine, only it has no effect on sneezing."

Sidney reached for the switch and turned off the light. "I'll get you up first thing and order you Eggs Benedict."

"You do take care of me, Sidney, I'll say that."

"I cherish you."

"And good help is so hard to find today."

Sidney crossed to the bed and slipped in next to Diana. She couldn't help herself, he realized. She couldn't any more control what she said than he could.

"You scratch my back, and I'll scratch yours," he said.

"It's been an evening of ups and downs, hasn't it?" said Diana.

"Mmm," said Sidney. He encircled her with his arms, and she rolled over to face him.

"Care to continue the motion?" she asked.

"Tacky," said Sidney. "You're getting tacky, angel."

"I love you, Sidney."

He kissed her deeply on the lips. I do love her, he told himself over and over. I do love her. I do love her.

"Don't close your eyes, Sidney," she said.

For the briefest instant, he peeked from under one slightly raised lid. He saw that Diana's eyes were fully open.

"I always close my eyes," he said.

"Not tonight," said Diana, and in her voice were all the sterile, brittle years of the past, and all the futile, frustrating years that would come. It was the cracked, pleading voice of soap opera, of hopeless yearning, a withered voice of experience missed.

"Look at *me* tonight," said Diana. "Let it be *me* tonight."

15

By four a.m. Papa Karl had drilled through in five places. Through the floor, that is, with the small pilot holes that were necessary to establish location before the larger, main holes could be bored. He glanced at Mama and *die Kinder*, sleeping peacefully. Dreaming, no doubt. Dreaming of Disneyland and Universal City, the Coliseum, Knott's Berry Farm. Or perhaps of the fatherland, the exquisite boat rides on the Rhine, the fascinating castle at Waldeck, their little home so close to the great Landesmuseum in Hanover. Papa himself could hardly get his mind off a Weisswurst, that tangy white sausage made of veal, calves' brains, and spleen. How he could taste it in his mouth!

Carefully, he put away his tools. Time to get some sleep now. He peered down the tiny holes into the room below. Perfect. The two black people were sleeping peacefully. He wondered if they would notice the miniscule quantity of plaster dust that must've fallen on their pil-

lows—perhaps even on their heads!—from the drilling operation. Not that it mattered. They would never connect it to anything. Tomorrow, when they were not there to hear the sound, he'd enlarge the holes so that the liquid could pour cleanly through. He closed the lid on his tool kit. During the day, he thought, he'd take his small family to visit Marineland, maybe put *die Kinder* on the Sky Tower ride. Yes, they'd enjoy that! Afterwards, they could have a leisurely supper back at the hotel, then return to their room. And tomorrow night, while everyone dreamed, Papa could absorb himself in his own private little enjoyment: emptying his bottle of nitric acid down on the faces of the sleeping blacks below.

Papa Karl took a deep breath. How beautiful life was that he, a simple sheet-metal worker, could experience all this.

Willis found himself looking directly into the sun. A Chauncey tactic, of course, he thought. No matter. He'd insist that they change sides every three games. Chauncey would do anything he could in order to win; it was up to Willis to stop him.

Willis checked Bettina's position on the court as he prepared to serve to Lola. He'd go for a flat, fast serve with little spin. The idea with the women was to overpower them. Show no mercy. He tossed the ball above his head, brought the racket back, then up and over in one smooth, coordinated motion. He could *feel* the ball land in Lola's service court across the net.

"Long!" yelled Chauncey immediately.

"What?" said Willis incredulously.

"Long!" repeated Chauncey. "The serve was long."

Willis looked over at Bettina, near the net. She shook her head and shrugged.

"You're half asleep," yelled Willis to Chauncey. "How can you see it was long?"

"I saw it with the half that's awake," said Chauncey. "Second serve!"

Willis lowered his voice as he turned to Bettina. "I hope he knows about orthopedics, because he's not going to be able to walk after this one." He bounced the ball several times. We'll see about long, he thought. Again the toss, the beautiful flowing overhead motion that had cost so many hundreds of dollars in lessons. Even more perfect than the last one, the ball rocketed into the center of Lola's service court.

"Long!" yelled Chauncey.

"What?" screamed Willis, a high-pitched, womanish shriek.

"Double fault!" said Chauncey. "Love-fifteen." He motioned Lola toward the net and moved back to the baseline in preparation to receive himself.

Willis stood like a statue. *Man with Hands on Hips*. "What??" he repeated. "WHAT? How can you call that ball long?"

"That's easy," said Chauncey. "You listenin'? Like this." He opened his mouth and stuck out his tongue. "Llllonnng!"

"You miserable—"

"Now serve the ball!"

Willis's fists were clenched. He stood unmoving.

"Serve it, Willis," said Bettina. "We only have the court for an hour."

Willis seethed, but decided finally to relent. "After I hit it, run into the clubhouse. I'm not leaving any survivors."

Once again, he stood poised at the baseline, tossed the ball, and brought his racket back. Once again, he struck the ball perfectly, this time with all his strength. He was quite surprised, therefore, when the fuzzy white

sphere came rocketing back at him very nearly as hard as he'd hit it. For a moment Willis wondered how Chauncey had managed the return—perhaps he'd taken secret, intensive lessons—and when he saw Bettina. Bettina! Draped over the net like a scarecrow, like yesterday's laundry stiffening in the wind. And he realized: his serve had hit her on the head.

"Oh, God," he said, horrified. He ran toward her. He thought: I've killed her! *Woman slain by husband on tennis court*. From the corner of his eye, he saw Chauncey and Lola, also running.

"Get a cold towel!" yelled Lola. "Somebody! Quick!"

"I'm sorry, honey," said Willis as he reached Bettina. "Jesus, I really am sorry!"

Bettina stirred. She moved a hand behind her head and tenderly fingered a spot just above her neck.

Not dead, thought Willis. Thank God! Brain damaged, perhaps. But not dead. Even if she did have to spend the rest of her life in a wheel chair and communicate by tongue clicks, at least it wasn't the worst. He'd get her absolutely the best in care. "I didn't mean it," he said. "I'm really so sorry."

Chauncey stood watching. "That's one fault," he said. "Second serve coming."

Willis could scarcely believe it. It was impossible. "What?"

"Second serve," repeated Chauncey.

Willis lunged at him through the net as Chauncey took a step backward. "Kill 'im," muttered Willis to himself, or words to that effect.

Bettina rose slowly, like some great wounded bird. She tugged on Willis's red-and-white tennis shirt. "Let them have our room tonight. *Please*. It's safer."

Willis spun around. "You're not crippled?"

Bettina tapped her head. "Just stunned for a sec,

but otherwise perfectly fine. My Afro hairdo repelled the ball harmlessly. It's like having a bullet-proof vest built into your head."

Willis exhaled in relief. He'd been picturing thirty years of twice-weekly visits to expensive nursing homes. He glared across the net at Chauncey. "Let's continue the game," he growled.

And then, raising his racket like a sword. "To the death!"

Marvin was sleeping on his back, his mouth open, the air bubbling noisily in at each inhalation, wheezing noisily out during the exhaust cycle. He was like a gasoline engine with a faulty muffler.

The blanket was bunched up on the other side of the bed, bunched in a very random, natural way so that to a casual observer, or even to a voyeur hanging upside down from a rope outside the window, Marvin seemed to be alone. He moaned.

"Never," he said sleepily. "Never again . . . never again . . . never again . . ."

It may be fairly judged that even in his stupor, and right-thinking and humane as he was, Marvin was not referring to the holocaust or to Watergate or to the passage of Proposition 13. He yawned and rubbed his face. Suddenly, he felt a hand slap down on his chest. He thought: I have two hands. One of these hands is on my cheek. The other of these hands is behind my neck. Therefore, the hand on my chest is not my hand. He sighted down his chin at the alien member, reached for it, lifted it, and held it aloft. Horror beyond horror!

Marvin yelled. "Ohh, *God!!*"

The strange hand did not belong to either a reptilian space being or to a piscine visitor from some South American swamp. Far more monstrous—as Marvin saw when he slowly peeled back the blanket—it was at-

tached to a beautiful, redhaired woman. A beautiful, naked, redhaired woman. The very same who'd been waiting for Marvin last night. Bunny. His brother's gift. Asleep now next to him. Gorgeous football boobies slack against her ribs, tight abdomen respirating in slowly rhythmical ins-and-outs, delicate bluish veins pulsating ever so slightly and looking marvelously patriotic against her white-on-white thighs with their triangular topping of cherry-red hairs.

"Ahhhh!" shouted Marvin, now fully awake. "What are you doing here? I thought you left." He nudged her side.

Bunny did not move.

"Hey! Hey, come on, you can't stay here! Wake up!" Marvin turned on the light, reached over to the end table, and grabbed his watch. "*Ten forty-five?*" he said aloud. "*Jesus Christ*, it's ten forty-five!"

He scrambled out of the bed, found his trousers crumpled in a heap on the floor, and struggled into them. He turned back to Bunny.

"Wake up! Come on, it's ten forty-five, don't you understand?" He zipped up.

Bunny did not move.

"Crazy," muttered Marvin. "I must be crazy."

He picked up the phone, dialed "O," and waited.

"Operator? What time is it?"

"Ten forty-five," came the answer.

"*Ten forty-five?*" said Marvin. "That can't be. That's what my watch says, and it must be broken."

"Ten forty-five," repeated the operator. "Uh, wait, wait just—"

"Mistake?" said Marvin.

"Now it's ten forty-six," said the operator.

"Why didn't you call me?" yelled Marvin. "I left a wake-up call for eight o'clock."

"Your room number, sir?"

"Two oh three."

There was a pause. Then, "That number is not listed for wake-up, sir. No one notified us."

"I didn't?" said Marvin.

"No, sir."

"Well, you should have called me anyway."

He hung up, found a shirt on the floor, and put it on. He hunted for socks. "Come on," he said to the unconscious shape on the bed. "Will ya? Hah?"

Bunny did not move.

Marvin found a sock, balanced like a stork on one foot, slipped the sock on the other. "Get up," he said. "Please. My wife could walk in any minute."

No response from the naked redhead.

"What's wrong with you?" He yelled, "Hey, you deaf or something?"

No answer. Nothing.

Marvin felt a tiny thrill of fear at the base of his spine. Picture: the slow respiration suddenly stops; the girl's mouth falls open and a mixture of foaming saliva and blood runs down her lips. A corpse! Yah! Cut to a room teeming with police, photographers' flashbulbs popping, white body outline drawn on the bed, while the real Bunny-corpse lies in a small plastic bag near the door.
New York Man Slays Junkie Pross!

Marvin walked around to the other side of the bed. The bottle of tequila from the night before lay empty near the end table. He picked it up and looked at it blankly.

"What did you—hey!" Relief, but also anger, flooded through him. "You drank an entire bottle of tequila with my wife coming in! Are you crazy?"

No answer.

Marvin rubbed his face in stupefied helplessness. "Oh, God . . . listen, you gotta sleep this off someplace else. This is a bad place to sleep this off." He looked

around and spotted a pitcher of water in a corner of the dressing table. "Water? You want a little water?" Facts began to crowd in his mind from his school days. "Our whole bodies are ninety percent water, you know? Yeah, it's amazing, but true. And the earth. The earth's surface is three-quarters water." *Come on, come on, wake up.* "Or maybe the earth is ninety percent water and it's us that's only three-quarters. Jesus, I don't know any more! Oh Jesus, oh Jesus . . ."

He lurched over to the pitcher, filled a small glass, and rushed back to the bed. He knelt by the side of the unconscious naked woman, lifted her head, and put the glass to her lips. "Drink, sweetheart. You got to be ninety percent water. Drink . . . for my sake." He heard himself moan, and then begin to shout. "Open your lips, you crazy broad!"

No response from the unclothed redhead.

Marvin let her head fall back to the pillow. It felt as heavy as a medicine ball. "Don't panic," he said aloud. "Panic is the quickest way to divorce. Must not panic." He wondered: If he hurled her out the window, could the authorities somehow trace the body's trajectory to his room. He stuck his fingers in the water glass and flicked a spray of droplets in her face. "Move!" he said sharply.

Sleeping Beauty declined the suggestion.

Marvin began to cry. "Please, God, make her move! I'll never be a bad person again, I promise." He knew, suddenly, why he was where he was. This was a trial. Over the years he'd grown progressively less religious, a near-atheist.

He had scoffed at heaven and an after-life. When you're dead, you're dead, he often declared in discussions. But now, now, he knew differently. This was a temptation sent from God, a test, pass-fail only—and he had flunked. You may not *be* dead when you're dead, he thought now.

He inhaled. Raskolnikov in Beverly Hills. Had to pull himself together. A different approach.

Marvin stopped crying and began to croon. "All right, honey, come on now . . . come on, little dumpling. We're gonna get you all dressed and then take you down and put you in a nice cab. Okay, sweetkins?"

He picked up Bunny's tan stretch-slacks from where they lay draped over a lounge chair and rushed back to the side of the bed. He lifted up Bunny's feet. "I'm really sorry this happened." He maneuvered the pants up over her heels. "It was a wonderful evening, whoever the hell you are. . . ."

He was breathing heavily as he tried to inch the tight slacks up Bunny's legs. "Push," he grunted. "Push, darling." He was past mid-calf. "Just get your leg up." He pulled the right pants leg up past her knee, then started on the left. "Come on, little sweetbread, come on! Push now! Make believe you're giving birth." The left pants leg went up, but the right fell down. He moaned. "You never *gave* birth, did you?" He bent again and pulled the pants once more in mighty effort. "You're not gonna help me, right?"

Bunny said nothing, but Marvin knew the answer.

He gave up and sat on the bed. "Think," he said. "You have a brain. Think, Marvin, think. . . ." He could burn the body, and the room with it. He could dismember it, put the pieces in his suitcase. . . . Wait a minute. This was a living person here, not a corpse. He could, he could . . .

"Change rooms!" he said aloud. "Let some *other* idiot get stuck with her." He rushed to the phone and lifted the receiver. "Operator, get me the front desk, please. It's an emergency." He turned to the sleeping Bunny. "I have two wonderful children who need a father. I'm a basically good person. Don't do this to me."

Bunny was unmoved.

Marvin heard a ringing, and then someone picked up. "Front desk, may I help you?" said the clerk.

"Hello?"

"Front desk."

"This is Mr. Michaels in suite two oh three and four. Listen, I'm very uncomfortable in this room."

"I'm sorry, sir, how can I help you?"

"The bed. There's some—the bed is very bad for my back. My spine feels like a Slinky. When I woke up this morning, I thought my life was over."

Everyone's unhappy, thought the clerk. People are scum. A curly-haired woman in her mid-thirties appeared in front of him. The clerk switched the phone to his other ear. "Well, we simply don't have another vacancy until two o'clock this afternoon, sir. Uh, one moment, Mr. Michaels." He held a hand over the receiver. "Can I help you, ma'am?" he said to the woman.

"Marvin Michaels, please. I'm Mrs. Michaels."

"Oh. Yes. He's on the phone now. Suite two oh three."

"Thank you," said the woman. "Tell him I'm on my way up." She turned and headed for the elevator.

"Mr. Michaels?" said the clerk into the phone. "As I was saying, I could have a nice suite for you sometime after two."

Marvin looked at the ceiling. "I can't wait until two o'clock. I'm expecting my wife in from the East any minute, and I know she's not going to be happy once she sees this room."

"Your wife is already here, sir," said the clerk. "She's on her way up."

Marvin felt his heart flutter. He felt great buckets of adrenalin flush into his bloodstream. "*My wife? My wife is here?*"

"Yes, sir. She's on her way."

"You sent my wife up without calling me?"

"Mr. Michaels, she—"

"*What the hell kind of a cheap hotel are you running here?* What is this, a sandbag job? Is that it? How can you—Jeeesus!"

He has a girl up there, the clerk thought gleefully. "I'm sorry, Mr. Michaels, I didn't realize—"

"Well, send somebody to stop her!"

"I don't think it's possible now, sir. But, really, is the situation so serious that—"

"Once she sees this bed, it could ruin her entire vacation!" said Marvin.

Why am I talking, he thought, and hung up. Why was he talking? He could use this valuable time to . . . to kill himself. He ran to the window. Time was money. Time was of the essence.

He froze as he heard the knock on the door.

16

I could jump, but *not* kill myself, Marvin thought. Serious injuries here might be almost as good as a death. With two broken legs, Millie'd never be angry at him, and his major medical insurance would cover most of the bills, and—

The knocking came again.

"Oh, God!" Marvin said aloud. "Oh, God!"

He started to pace back and forth, disoriented, half sobbing, tugging at his shirt and hair. "Oh, God! Oh, God! Oh, God! Oh, God! Oh, God!" He looked at the sleeping, naked, redhaired Bunny, sprawled obscenely in his bed, the stretch slacks still draped around her ankles.

"Listen to me!" he said to her. "I have to go into the living room now. Once I'm in there, lock this door and don't open it for anyone."

The words sounded to him like an admonition given by a detective to a housewife in some years-old TV movie. They were supposed to help her deal with a mad

rapist-killer-dismemberer who was working the neighborhood. As Marvin remembered it, the murderer later came in through a window.

Bunny had failed to react, and Marvin dropped heavily to his knees. "Help me, O Lord, in my hour of need."

He waited an instant, but the Lord's response was no more encouraging than Bunny's—another knock on the door, this time louder, more insistent.

"Who is it?" called Marvin pleasantly.

"It's me."

"Millie?"

"Yes."

"Just a minute," said Marvin.

He began scrambling toward the living room, then realized he was still on his knees. He stood up, looked at the ceiling, then made a fist. Quickly, he grabbed Bunny's shoes and the empty liquor glass, shut the door to the bedroom, ran to the patio, and threw the three items over the railing. He hurried back into the living room, puffed up a pillow, then rushed to the corridor door and yanked it breathlessly open.

"Hello, sweetie."

Millie cocked her head. "So why didn't you pick me up at the airport?"

"Why?"

"Yes, why?"

"Why?" said Marvin. "Why? You know why, I'll tell you why. Here's why. I didn't pick you up because . . . I've been sick all day."

"Oh, Marvin."

"Practically dying, I was. Only a minute ago I was on my knees, praying to God, that's how sick I was. Come in."

He led her into the living room. "I threw up in

the other room. Don't go in there. The doctor just left a little while ago."

"You had a doctor?"

"I have acute gastroenteritis. Serious, he said, but nothing to worry about."

"Oh, my God!" said Millie. "When did this first happen?"

"About two o'clock in the morning," he said. "Here, sit down." He ushered her to a comfortable chair. If I can just get her out of the room, he thought.

"What did you eat?" said Millie.

"Uh, what did I eat? I ate a lot. Uh, spaghetti is what it was. With white clam sauce. I think that's what did it. The clams, you know, they're tight, nasty little animals that—"

"But you've had that before and it's never bothered you."

"Yes, uh-huh, true. But . . . but this time I had . . . uh . . . tacos with it. *That's* what must have done it. The tacos." Marvin thought furiously. "It was a Mexican-Italian restaurant. The waiters' sombreros were shaped like pizzas."

"Where did you get a doctor?" asked Millie.

"I called my brother. Harry got me the doctor. A wonderful internal man. Internist, I mean. Pumps the stomachs of all the big stars. But . . . it was that restaurant. Terrible. Greasiest place I ever saw. Even the napkins kept slipping off the table." He sat down on the couch.

"You really look terrible," said Millie. "You're all white and pasty and . . ." She shook her head. "Disheveled, you look."

"I'm not disheveled," said Marvin.

"Then why are you only wearing one sock? Why does your shirt look like it's just been used to polish a car?"

"I'm sick," said Marvin. "Even my clothes are sick."

"All right," said Millie. "Look, why don't you get into bed? You'll feel more comfortable."

"No!" said Marvin quickly. "I won't. I'm not supposed to lie down. It makes me nauseous. I feel a lot better in this room. It's cheerier."

"Well, then, maybe you feel like a little tea. . . ."

"No, not really. No little tea. I need, uh, Compazine spansules. Yes. That's what I need."

"What's that?"

"It stops nausea. Coats your stomach, coats your entire insides, all the organs. It's like a clothing store for your digestive tract. Compazine spansules. They, sort of, *span* your body."

"Did you call the drugstore in the hotel?"

"They don't carry it," sighed Marvin. "Isn't that a shame? The one thing that could help me. It has codeine in it. The nearest place that has it is a drugstore on Santa Monica Boulevard. But they don't deliver." He rose. "I'll have to go over there myself." He winced and clutched his stomach. "I'm just nervous about throwing up in the taxi."

Millie held out her hand. "Sit! Sit! Relax. I'll go. Where's the prescription?"

"What prescription?"

"Didn't the doctor give you a prescription?"

"No. Why should—"

"They're not gonna give you codeine without a prescription."

Marvin closed his eyes. "Yes. Here they will." He opened them again and stared off into space, as if thinking. "According to California state law, for codeine, you don't need a prescription. This is law here."

"Well, if you don't need a prescription," said

Millie, "just send a cab driver. It's worth it. I'm exhausted. I just flew in from New York after a three-hour delay at Kennedy. They said a *Daily News* truck cut off a seven-forty-seven on the main runway, causing extensive damage to the plane. You want me to call for the taxi?"

"No," said Marvin, shaking his head vigorously.

"They tell me you can't trust the cab drivers out here."

"Who tells you?"

"Everyone. Everyone I've spoken to. First thing I say is, 'How're the cabbies out here?' And they tell me, 'Not good. They're notorious for going for medicine and not coming back.' " He clutched again at his stomach.

"Oh, God, what I'd give for a good Compazine spansule!"

"What are you going to do about the bar mitzvah?"

"Oh, we're going," said Marvin. "I didn't fly all the way from New York to miss my nephew's bar mitzvah. We're going if they have to bring me in on a stretcher." An image: A darkened catering hall, a fanfare by the band—and then, four white-gloved waiters bring him in on a litter. They hold him aloft, douse him with brandy and cherry sauce, and as the MC gleefully proclaims, "Cherries Marvin!" they simultaneously strike matches. . . .

"I'm glad you reminded me," said Marvin. "Harry called a few minutes ago. He wants us to get over to the temple as soon as possible."

"Temple? I just got here," said Millie.

"See?" said Marvin. "Everything works out for the best. Perfect timing. Why don't you go down for a cab, and I'll finish getting dressed." He smiled unconvincingly.

Millie looked at her watch. "It's just after eleven. I thought we didn't have to be there until one."

"That's for the others," said Marvin. He felt a muscle high up in his left cheek begin to twitch uncon-

trollably. "Harry wants us to get a seat down front. His kid has a very soft voice, and Harry doesn't want us to miss his speech."

"Marv, so it wouldn't kill us if we sat in the second row instead of the first. I always feel uncomfortable, anyway, up too close. I feel like the rabbi is going to announce to the congregation that I'm not reading the Hebrew. I'm sure we have time." Millie looked at him peculiarly.

"Oh, you don't know," said Marvin, standing up and pacing back and forth. "You don't know how these California synagogues are. The people flock into them like crazy. Crowds, day and night. Everything is cults out here. Cults and fads. Today it happens to be Judaism, tomorrow could be crockery worship. You don't *know* what goes on in this state."

"And how do *you* know?" asked Millie sharply. "I suppose you spoke to the same people who told you the cabbies steal medicine."

Marvin nodded sheepishly. "Well . . . yes. That's it. Very knowledgeable, these people. Look, you really should go down and get that taxi now, okay? I'll finish getting dressed, and then I'll join you."

Millie looked off toward a corner. "And what am I going to wear?" she asked, her voice quavering.

"What do you mean?" asked Marvin. "Didn't you bring a dress? You wear a dress. I told you to bring a dress."

"They lost it," said Millie. And with that, she turned her face into the back of the chair and began to cry. "They can't find my luggage."

"Who can't?" said Marvin. "You mean the hotel?"

"The airlines," wailed Millie in a chair-muffled voice. "They lost my luggage."

"Son of a bitch!" Marvin clenched his teeth,

feigning excessive anger. "Kill 'em! Kill 'em! Kill the bastards!"

"My new suitcase," moaned Millie, "with my new dress and my new shoes. I have nothing to wear. I lost everything." She sobbed.

"Lost your luggage," said Marvin, now deeply into his anger routine. "Your good luggage that I gave you for your birthday? My God, that gets me insane!" He grabbed his head and stalked about the room. "In this day and age, to still lose luggage . . ."

"They said they'll call me at the hotel when they find it."

"We'll sue, of course," said Marvin. "Just wait! We'll pound on them for thousands. I'll get Julian to send them a letter—you know Julian, he defended Joey Gallo?—anyway, they'll shit watermelons when they hear from him. Lose luggage! We'll see how they lose luggage."

"All I wanted," said Millie, finally holding back the sobs, "was to come back here, take a hot bath and a nap."

"There's no time for a nap. I know those airlines," said Marvin. "Here today, gone tomorrow. You've got to go down there and make a fuss. Call a cab. We're going back to the airport *right now*. Sons of bitches! Flying around the country losing luggage. They probably steal the stuff. Divide it up among the pilots and stewardesses. Come on, we're going down and demand satisfaction."

"I don't want satisfaction," said Millie. "I want my bar mitzvah dress."

"All right," said Marvin, throwing up his hands theatrically. He paced back and forth. "We'll forget the satisfaction." He reached in his pocket for his wallet. "Here, take as much money as you need. Go shopping in Beverly Hills. This is the best time of day before they get crowded."

"I know, I know," said Millie tiredly. "There's a

shopping cult or something, right? Listen, this trip is costing us a fortune. Why did you take a suite? It's so expensive."

Thank God at least I did that, thought Marvin. But why can't He also give me a little help in getting Millie out of here? "I wanted you to be comfortable," he said. "To celebrate your first trip to California."

"Well, it was a nice idea. . . ." said Millie.

"It was a mistake," said Marvin. "The bedroom is stifling. It's all those vines outside the window—you can't breathe. I'm going to tell them to close off the bedroom and we'll just keep this room." *Cask of Amontillado*, he thought. Or was it *The Telltale Heart*? Would he hear Bunny's heart beating through the walled-off bedroom?

"This room, at least, is cheerful," he said.

Millie looked around. "There are no beds in this room," she said quietly.

"Oh? I didn't know you wanted to sleep over. I thought we'd go up to San Francisco right after the bar mitzvah."

"The same day? Marvin, I just got here. My ears are still clogged from the flight, I'm tired, and I have no luggage. I'm not in the mood for touring. Besides, as long as I'm here, shouldn't I see Los Angeles?"

Marvin frowned. "What's to see? There's not much to see. It's a city, that's all. Lotta cars. Dangerous, too. Lots of killings here. Robberies."

"Marvin, after living six years in our neighborhood, this you call dangerous? No one even tried to rob me at Los Angeles airport. They did at Kennedy. So how can this compare? I mean, in New York you can take Basic Mugging for credit at five colleges."

"All I know," said Marvin, "is that everyone I speak to says Los Angeles has very few points of interest."

"The third largest city in the United States?"

"Only in population," said Marvin. "There's plenty of people to see, but we don't know any of them."

Millie shook her head. "Don't be ridiculous. You know this whole conversation is utterly ludicrous." She stood up. "I have to go to the bathroom."

Marvin sprang ahead of her and planted himself in her path. "Now?"

Millie's eyes widened. "I haven't gone in four hours. My bladder's probably the size of the Goodyear blimp. Yes, now is a good time."

"I just told you," said Marvin frantically, "I threw up in there. All over!"

Millie shrugged. "I've seen you get sick before."

"Not on a holiday, though. Not on a vacation."

Millie held out her hands, palms up. "What, I have to see you puke under all possible conditions? I've never seen you do it during a snowstorm, either. What's the difference, you see it once, you've seen it all."

Marvin chuckled nervously. "I think on a holiday one should try to preserve *some* sense of romanticism. At home, I wouldn't mind."

"I can't *wait* till I get home," said Millie. "Do I have to spell it out for you? I have to pee. P—E—E. N—O—W."

She started for the bathroom, and Marvin threw a quick cross-body block to cut her off. "Please!" he said. "Give me the opportunity of making it presentable first."

"Marvin, what's—"

"Please. It means a lot to me."

Millie narrowed her eyes. "We've been married fifteen years, and you've never cleaned up a bathroom before."

"Well, I think it's high time I started," said Marvin. "I realized that, you know. I said to myself: Marvin,

you're a filth. All this time, and never once have you cleaned the bathroom. Well, I'm gonna make it up to you, Millie. Right now. Right here. This bathroom is gonna get fifteen years of cleaning." He nodded vigorously. "Cleanliness is next to godliness, and if I can't be godly I sure as hell can be cleanly. It's sort of a sub-variety of religious experience. Look, I'll be right out."

"You'd better be," said Millie. "Otherwise you'll just have to clean all over again right where I'm standing."

"Few minutes," promised Marvin. He put his arms around Millie and gave her a gentle shove in the direction of the terrace. "Why don't you go outside and get a little sun? You look pale from the flight. Sun is good for you, gives you vitamin D, makes you look healthy."

"Promotes skin cancer," said Millie, but she headed away from the bedroom.

Marvin smiled at her, then rushed into the bedroom, bolting the door behind him. He listened for Millie's footsteps, then raced to the bed where Bunny still lay unconscious.

"I'm sorry, miss," he whispered, "but I'm going to have to leave you out in the hall." He bent down and shoved his hands under the smooth skin of her back. "Don't worry, they'll take wonderful care of you. They have terrific service here."

He tugged sharply upward and felt something catch in the lower part of his back. He tried to straighten up, and failed.

I'm locked, he thought. A cruel, yet curiously appropriate punishment. Thirty minutes of extramarital sex after fifteen years—and now, with Millie waiting anxiously in the next room, he and the bimbo were locked in place like statues.

Marvin managed to get one of his hands around behind him. He started to massage the base of his spine. "God froze me," he whispered to the sleeping naked red-

head, who'd fallen back on the bed. He rubbed himself as hard as he could. He pressed in, out, and sideways. I'll do penance, God, he thought. You want penance, you got it. The next thirty years in *schul*, eight o'clock Saturday mornings, it's yours. Throw in heavy stock market losses, if that'll help. He kept up the massage and felt a slight loosening. All right, he thought. All right. I'll take cancer of the prostate when I'm sixty-three—*just let me stand the fuck up!* He pulled himself erect.

"Thank you, God," he muttered aloud. He wondered suddenly if he really had to keep the other promises.

Gingerly, making sure to keep his back straight, he again slid his hands beneath Bunny, this time under her arms. He increased his force slowly and managed to pull her off the bed, stopping when her heels struck the floor with a dull thud. After a moment he continued, dragging her along the carpeting until he got near the door to the corridor, then propping her up against the wall. It was amazing—even potted, dragged, and propped, she was still gorgeous. He opened the door, then bent down again to the sleeping Bunny, and hauled her into the corridor.

He almost knocked over the bellboy, who was on his way to Marvin's room.

17

Marvin was sure it was a heart attack. God had rejected the cancer at sixty-three for a heart attack right now!

At first contact with the bellboy, Marvin had spun around, gasped, rolled his eyes back in his head and clutched at his chest. Bunny had a much milder reaction, merely dropping unceremoniously to the floor.

"Mr. Michaels?" said the bellboy, a blond, well-built sixteen-year-old.

"Wh— Oh! Oh, my God." Marvin breathed rapidly, tried to relax. "Oh, Christ." He held up a hand. "Wait. Wait a minute. I'm having a little heart attack here." He finally managed a long, deep inhalation. "Don't ever do that!" he said. "You see what happened? My ticker stopped."

"Sorry," said the bellboy. "I was just bringing up Mrs. Michael's bag."

"Oh," said Marvin. He reached down to Bunny,

pushed her up against the wall. "You hear that, honey?" he said. "They found your luggage."

Bunny didn't answer.

"She was very worried," said Marvin to the bellboy. "What, the airline brought it over?"

"Yes, sir."

"She was just going down to look for it."

The bellboy nodded. "You want it in the bedroom?"

"No! Yes! I mean, yes. Leave it there."

"In the hall?"

"Yes!" Marvin clapped a hand over his eyes.

"No! Wait a minute. Give it to me."

The bellboy handed him the suitcase.

"All right, put it in the bedroom," said Marvin. He handed the bag back.

The boy shook his head, then deposited the suitcase just inside the door. When he emerged from the room, studiously avoiding looking at Bunny, he said, "Is . . . uh . . . Mrs. Michaels all right?"

Marvin thought he could see just the tiniest smirk on the boy's lips, hear the eentsiest bit of sarcasm in the voice.

"She's tired, he said. "She just flew in from New York." Realizing he didn't have his wallet with him, he fished around in his pocket and finally handed the boy forty-three cents. "Thank you very much," he said.

The boy looked down at the change and nodded. When he'd gone halfway down the corridor, he turned back and yelled, "I had a piece like her once. Gave me the clap for six weeks."

Marvin frowned, dragged the sleeping Bunny back inside the bedroom, and shut the door. He looked around for a place to put her. There came a banging on the door to the living room.

"Marvin? Marvin, why is this locked?" Millie yelled.

"I can't hear you!" shouted Marvin frantically.

"I have to go."

"I'm in the bathroom, dear!" yelled Marvin. And then, musically, "I'm cleaning."

"Marvin, I can't wait any more. Will you please open the door!"

Marvin hauled Bunny to the bed, lifted her onto the sheets. "Open the what?" he yelled. He threw the covers over the body, then realized that the legs still protruded.

"The door! The door!" Millie screamed.

Marvin stuffed both legs back under, but now there was a huge, ass-shaped bulge in the cover. He extended the blanket about two feet and pressed down the hump. "Here comes the door," he sang. "The opening of the door is coming."

"Marvin, open this goddam thing now!"

Panicky, Marvin gathered Bunny's dress and stockings and flung them under the bed. "And I'm on my way to the door!" he said. He took two steps, then noticed Bunny's head slipping out from under the covers. It hung like a ripe pineapple over the edge of the mattress. Marvin slapped at it angrily and shoved it back under the blanket. He rushed to the door and tore it open, forcing his mouth into a smile "You see? It's open."

Millie barged in. "I was all set to have my first accident since the second grade!"

"Don't you know how to work a door?" said Marvin. Desperately, he tried to slow his breathing.

"What took you so long?" said Millie. "What's the matter, you got a girl in here?"

Marvin forced a laugh. "That's right. I got a cute redhead in the bed. Hey, I thought you hadda go."

"I do," said Millie. She walked toward the bathroom.

"It's all cleaned up, honey bun," said Marvin. "It's like I was never in there."

Millie paused at the door and sniffed. "I smell perfume."

"Oh, uh, well, of course. They spray it in all the rooms. Terrific hotel."

Millie shut the door behind her. Marvin looked around frantically, spotted a closet on the rear wall, rushed over to it, estimated its size, then scrambled back to the bed to get the body. He slipped his arms under Bunny and pulled. God, if you let me get her over to that closet, he thought, I'll take the cancer in my late fifties. He had the body three-quarters out of the bed when he heard the first gurgling sounds of the toilet being flushed. Calculation: fifteen seconds for Millie to adjust her clothes, thirty seconds to wash—no! He couldn't do it. I should've made God a better offer, he realized. Perhaps a stroke at forty-seven. Too late. He lugged Bunny back to the bed, covered her in a mad frenzy, shoving arms and legs roughly under the blankets, then quickly sat on the edge of the mattress and smiled as Millie emerged from the bathroom. He felt little consolation that his calculations had been correct—he'd never have made it.

"Feel better, sugar pie?" he asked.

"A little," said Millie.

"I thought you really had to go. You were only in there a minute. But as long as you're all right."

Millie walked over to the dressing table and stared into the large mirror above it. "I've got circles under my eyes."

"Really?" said Marvin. "I've got squares under mine. Or trapezoids. What's the difference?"

"The difference is I didn't sleep all night," said Millie. "You did."

"I didn't, either," said Marvin.

Millie moved toward the bed. "Shove over. I want to take a nap."

Marvin flung his arms protectively over the bed. "A nap?? Mmm, why do you want to take a nap? You can nap at the bar mitzvah. You know how boring they are. Close your eyes in the *schul*, everyone'll think you're very religious."

"Marvin, please, I'd like to sleep."

"Listen, naps are for children, Millie. Really! They're not good for you. I've been reading, *Scientific American*, experiments on Russian sheepdogs proved that those who napped died sooner than those who didn't."

"But they died happy, Marvin—rested, not exhausted like the others."

"Millie—"

"I am not a Russian sheepdog, Marvin!"

"Of course not. I know that. But look, didn't you ever hear the expression, 'No naps are good naps'? It's folk wisdom. Besides, between the synagogue and the reception there'll be plenty of time to relax."

"I'll never get to the bar mitzvah at all if I don't have a few minutes of rest right now," said Millie. "Will you move over?"

Marvin stood up. He had reached that finely balanced point where the strain of lying exactly equalled the pain of telling the truth.

"Millie—" It was no use. "Millie, would you sit down a minute?"

"Marvin, I—"

"Please. I . . . have something to tell you." And now, I end my life, her life, and the kids' lives, he thought. He put his arms on her shoulders and backed her up into an armchair.

"Can't I lie down and hear it?" she asked.

"It's the kind of thing you should hear sitting up," he said.

She sat quietly, aware finally that something highly unusual was going to come out of him.

"Millie, you mean more to me than you could possibly know. . . ."

Millie clapped a hand over her mouth. "You have a medical thing," she said through an opening in her fingers. "That's it, isn't it? This whole behavior. Oh, my God, and it's serious! A tumor." She started to sway from side to side.

"Millie, it's not a—"

"Thank God! Thank God it's not a tumor." She gazed at him pityingly. "The blood? I knew it. Did I tell you to visit Cooperstein last month for a checkup? Did I? But no, you were afraid he'd give you a proctoscope. So now look! Look at—"

"Millie!" Marvin found himself shouting, and immediately lowered his voice. "It's nothing medical. I'm healthy as a bull. I'm fine."

Millie stared at him. "It's not your health?"

"No. It's just, as much as one person loves another . . . sometimes we transgress." He averted his eyes. "Sometimes we do foolish little things that unwittingly may cause hurt and injury to the other."

"I don't think you've ever consciously hurt me," said Millie quietly.

"Consciously, no."

"So?"

"But a careless word here . . ." He gestured helplessly with his left hand. "A thoughtless gesture there . . ." Without realizing it—oh, the power of the subconscious!—his right hand moved toward the bed. Quickly, he snapped it back.

"Nothing major, Marvin," said Millie, great concern in her eyes. "We've had our disagreements—oh, I

remember very well the time you spit on my mother in the driveway—but nothing major.”

“I’m glad you brought that up, Millie. Because some people would consider an incident like that as totally traumatic.”

“Traumatic?” said Millie. “No. Ugly, maybe. To spit on a seventy-five-year-old woman—”

“She wouldn’t let me park in my own garage.”

“Vicious, perhaps. Callous. Heartless. Cruel. But . . . not major. You did apologize. It was a spur of the moment thing. No lasting harm was done. . . .”

“What would you consider major?” asked Marvin anxiously.

“Major?” said Millie. “Gee, I don’t know. If I discovered you’d brought an eggroll home and didn’t give me any, or—”

“Millie!”

She shook her head. “I can’t picture you doing anything major.” She looked up at the ceiling. “I guess if you were cruel to the children . . .”

Marvin clapped his hands together. “I would put that Number One! I think that would be the worst thing a man could do in a marriage. To be cruel to the children is—”

“Unspeakable.”

“And unpardonable. *All* else could be forgiven!”

Millie nodded. “Also, if I caught you with another woman. That would be major.”

Marvin held up a hand. “Wait a minute. Just wait. Let’s not get off the children thing so fast. To me, children are the reflection of the love—”

“Marvin, I’ve got to lie down.”

She made a move then in the direction of the bed, but Marvin managed to grab one of her wrists and yank her toward him.

“God, I’ve missed you!” he said. “Let’s make love

in the living room." A wild last chance. The odds of his even being able to erect—after last night, in these circumstances, with his own wife—were miniscule. Still, the hopeful improbable, however remote, was preferable to a dismal certainty. He pulled her into the living room.

"Marvin, you're breaking my wrist!"

"I missed you and I want you."

"You missed me? You've only been away one night."

"I know. But there's a three-hour time difference. And I've heard the food out here has certain chemicals. . . . But mainly it's you. I've never seen you look so pretty."

"Marvin—"

He began to kiss and bite her neck. If he could manage to stimulate certain key arteries that controlled blood to the brain . . . "Come here, you cute little thing."

Millie squirmed away. She wiped her neck. "Marvin, don't be ridiculous. There's not even a bed in here."

"That's the point. Spontaneity. Let's put some spice in our lives."

"Fine. But first I'd like to stick a nap in mine."

"I'll give you what to stick," said Marvin. "Come on, Mill, they have terrific carpeting here. Let's try it."

She looked at him incredulously, shook her head, and started for the bedroom. Marvin quickly dropped to the floor, lay flat, and raised his arms in invitation. "Don't reject me, Millie."

"This is no rejection," she said, pausing. "I'm just seeking a short postponement. And better working conditions."

"Oh, come on!" said Marvin. "We tried pot last year, let's try carpeting this year." (He thought back. Friends had been urging them for years to try marijuana, claiming it would awaken them to new realms of sensuality and release all their inhibitions. One night, he and Millie had each smoked a joint, Marvin remembering only that

it left him feeling confused. Later, their friends told them they'd "behaved like savages," and to please not call them any more.)

"Maybe tonight," said Millie. "Right now if I don't lie down, I'll pass out." She started again for the bedroom.

"Millie, *wait!*"

Too late—she'd entered the room. Marvin raced after her and watched in horror as she plopped down on the right side of the bed.

"Nooooo!" he moaned.

Millie bounced up immediately, walked over to him, and looked at him closely. "You don't have to get *that* upset!"

"I'm . . . excited," said Marvin, breathing rapidly. "You see how excited I am?"

"Well, I said tonight," said Millie.

"A man gets urges. . . ."

"Urges are fine. But not in the morning. I never saw you so sex-crazed in the morning."

"Morning? Oh, yeah, right. Morning." He laughed insanely. "Isn't it amazing what jet lag will do? My watch may say morning, but my groin says, 'Nighttime, nighttime.'"

"Too bad your talking groin doesn't say these things at home," said Millie. "Look, why don't you just lie down next to me?"

"I'd like to be *very* next to you."

"Not *that*. I mean, we don't have to make love right now. Just lie down with me for a half-hour and relax. You can do that, can't you? Come on." She returned to the bed and reclined in the spot she'd just left.

"She maketh me to lie down," muttered Marvin. But instead of lying on the bed, he prostrated himself on the carpet beside her.

Millie sat up and stared at him in disbelief. "What are you doing down there?"

"My back," said Marvin. "I think I have some sort of a disk problem. I think I have too many. Too many disks."

"Marvin, that's—"

"Or too few. Or they're chipped. Look, I don't know. All I know is that my back is killing me—spasms, paralysis. I think I need an orthodontist—uh, orthopedist. One of them. I can't concentrate with this lousy pain. Maybe acupuncture."

"Marvin. . . ."

"The bed's too soft," he pleaded. "With my spine, how can I chance it?"

Millie tightened her lips. "I don't believe that for a second."

"You don't?" said Marvin forlornly.

"No."

He rose to his knees and clutched his chest. "Millie, I can't keep this up any more. I'm gonna get a heart attack. Maybe more than one." He stood up and paced from bed to wall, and back. He was perspiring freely, and he kept rubbing his head and neck. "I've got to tell you something, Millie."

"You've *been* telling me things. . . ."

"No, no. This is the truth now. No more lies. I can't lie any more."

Millie nodded slowly. "I thought something was up." She paused. "I guess I *knew* something was up, only I didn't want to know."

"It was never my intention to hurt you, Millie. . . ."

He wants a divorce, thought Millie. Something's happened here, and now he wants a divorce.

". . . but it's very possible in the next few minutes you may be terribly, terribly hurt."

A divorce. The reality was beginning to sink in. A life of bitter loneliness, abandoned and ostracized by former friends, raising psychologically crippled, fatherless

children, struggling financially, no one to rub her legs while watching the eleven o'clock news on TV, shamelessly entering the singles bars where prowling, sex-crazed men would abuse and degrade her. . . .

"Oh, Marvin, please don't leave me!" Millie cried.

"Leave you?" said Marvin. "What're you saying? I'm not leaving you. I'm talking about hurting you, not leaving you."

"Hurting me?"

Marvin looked down. "Yes," he said quietly.

"Is it major or minor?"

"To me, it was minor. To you, I think it's going to be extremely major."

Millie felt relieved. No divorce. How could anything be as bad as that? He's probably just going to say something that'll uproot our lives, she thought.

"Tell me, Marvin. It couldn't be that bad as long as you're not trying to cover up something." She looked at him earnestly. In back of her, on the other side of the bed, Bunny pushed down the covers.

Marvin, who'd seen this, rolled his eyes toward the ceiling. "Millie . . . there's something I'd like to show you. This is no Watergate here. I'm not trying to stonewall it, or tough it out, or—"

"Marvin, what are you talking about?"

"But I'm going to ask you to do something for me first. Will you?"

"Yes. I mean, it depends. I mean, if it's reasonable . . ."

"Say nothing for ten seconds. That's all I require. Is that too much?"

"No, but—"

"Whatever comes to mind, please, for the sake of both of us . . . say nothing for ten seconds."

Millie nodded solemnly.

"You may turn around now, Millie."

Bewildered, she swiveled her head slowly. And strangely—in that first hundredth of a second, still not making all the connections—she wondered how her husband had managed to fool around with this beautiful, naked redhead. After all, he'd said his back was bad, hadn't he?

10

They'd managed to retain the court for an additional sixty minutes, and it was a good thing. By the time they'd reached the ninth game of the third set, they'd been playing for nearly an hour and three-quarters. All four of them were near exhaustion.

Willis stood at the baseline, his tennis shirt and even his shorts soaked through with perspiration. Bettina waited tensely near the net. They'd finally gotten the game going again after both sides had agreed that the women would make all the judgment calls and settle all disputes. Now, Willis bounced the ball prior to serving. On his face was a wicked smile.

"Set and match point coming up!" he shouted.

"It may be coming up, but it ain't going down!" yelled Chauncey from the other side. "Hit it!"

Willis tossed the ball and smacked a fast, twisting serve, just in close to the center line. Chauncey, playing wide, had to lunge for it, and just managed to hit a weak

backhand return right to Willis. Willis smashed the ball cross-court toward Lola, who'd dropped back to cover. Even as she ran, she saw him charge the net.

"Lob!" yelled Chauncey. "They're both up! Lob it over their heads!"

Lola hit a high topskin lob that came down a foot inside the baseline, as Bettina and Willis raced frantically back.

"I got it!" yelled Bettina, looking up into the shocking blue sky.

"I got it!" shouted Willis even louder.

"It's mine!"

"Watch out!"

The ball bounced fifteen feet in the air.

"I got it!"

"Mine!"

Their swings came at exactly the same time, Willis's hitting the ball (a little squib that landed on the adjacent court) and Bettina's getting Willis's head directly in the racquet's "sweet spot." In the carnage that followed, the only certainty was that this accident was the precipitating event.

Whether it was Willis's plummeting body that caused Bettina's subsequent fall and three backward roll-overs, or whether she simply tripped over her own feet, is unresolved. Equally unclear is whether Chauncey, rushing forward, was leaping in joyous exultation (of which Willis later accused him) or whether he was trying to jump the net to get more rapidly to the accident. Motive aside, what is documented is the catching of his right foot by the top of the net, and his chopped-tree, face-first drop to the expensive composition surface. Completing the decimation was Lola's mad rush around the net, her stepping on either a ball or Chauncey's foot, and the resulting banana-peel-type slip and thirty-two-feet-per-second-

squared descent. They lay there, the four of them, for nearly three minutes without moving.

It was another ten minutes before they'd recovered sufficiently to argue.

"It's broken," said Bettina, gingerly probing the lower part of her shin bone. She sat near the midcourt line and raised her leg gently off the ground.

"It's not broken," said Willis, sounding jaded.

"My ankle is broken," insisted Bettina. "I can feel it."

"Not broken," repeated Willis. "Sprained."

"You're a nose and throat man—how do *you* know?"

"If it was broken, you wouldn't be arguing now, woman! You'd be screaming."

"Oh, is that the way you diagnose, doctor? By the amount of noise a patient makes? What if he or she is unconscious?"

"Then we don't worry about broken legs," said Willis. He looked over at Chauncey, sitting near the baseline. "The other time we don't worry," he said, raising his voice especially loudly, "is when the injured party was the perpetrator of an assault."

Chauncey removed his hand from where he'd been pressing on his forehead. A nasty red welt puffed slowly outward. "The only assault here was the one you made on human decency," he called.

Willis looked skyward, then brought his gaze down to Bettina. "The man saw your shoe laces were untied," he said. "That's why he lobbed over your head."

Chauncey sprang to his feet. "You hear that?" he said excitedly to Lola, who was massaging the base of her spine. "You hear what the man said?"

"Yes, I heard," said Lola calmly.

"You heard—and that don't rile you? You stand

there rubbin' your ass, while that man accuses me of lobbing with intent to injure?"

"It is not my ass I am rubbing," said Lola.

"The man is libeling me," said Chauncey, his voice growing higher in pitch. "You're my witness. The man is defaming my character."

"There's no character *to* defame," said Willis. He rose and walked over behind Bettina. "Can you walk, honey?"

Bettina looked up at him. "Can a gerbil cater a wedding? *No*, I can't walk."

Willis nodded, feeling a sharp pain just above his neck where the racket had struck him. "All right," he said. "We'll have to carry you back." He yelled over to Chauncey. "You wanna give me a hand here, killer?"

Chauncey scowled, but came over. They helped Bettina to her feet, then made their way toward the exit, with Bettina leaning heavily on them for support. Lola pushed open the gate and went through it. Suddenly, behind her, she heard a howl of pain. The gate had rebounded, caught Bettina in the calf of her injured leg, and wedged it against the stop.

"Ahhhhhhh! Oh, God! Ahhhhhhh!"

"Hold the door!" yelled Willis. "Why the hell didn't you hold that thing? Idiot!"

Chauncey looked at him behind Bettina's back. "You yell at her, I drop your wife right here."

"You drop my wife," said Willis, "you'll need a proctologist just to brush your teeth."

"Leave me alone, the both of you," moaned Bettina. "I want a strange doctor. Someone I can trust."

"All right, honey," said Willis. "Shh! Keep calm now. Just put all your weight on us. All right, we're gonna pull now, when I say three. Okay, we all ready?" He looked at Chauncey. "Ready, one—two—*three!*"

The two men tugged on Bettina so as to dislodge

her from the gate. Naturally, they pulled in opposite directions.

"Oh, Godddddd! Ahhhhh!"

"Don't step down on it," said Chauncey.

"Not my leg," gasped Bettina.

"What?"

"My arms. You're pulling my arms apart."

"Let go of her arms!" screamed Willis. "You jackass! You numbskull!"

"You're the one with the numb skull," said Chauncey. "I think the injury finished off whatever remained of your brain."

"Assault and battery," said Willis. "This is battery. I'll sue you for loss of services."

"The only services you lost were on the tennis court," said Chauncey, "and the one you oughta sue is your instructor, although he must've been temporarily insane for taking you on as a student."

"That has nothing to do with you trying to tear my wife in half!"

"It was *your* fault," said Chauncey. "You were the one going the wrong way."

"You giving directions again?" said Willis. "The last time you gave directions, we missed San Francisco." He turned to Bettina. "You ready to try once more, sweetheart?"

Bettina nodded dazedly. "Is this what they do to prisoners of war?" she asked.

They were back at the hotel by one o'clock. Mama had wanted to do some shopping, and so the whole family had spent the morning browsing through stores and picking up souvenirs. After lunch, Papa had suggested they relax by the hotel pool for a while before starting on their afternoon excursion to Marineland. They'd been at poolside

only fifteen minutes when, from the corner of his eye, Papa had seen the black woman limp off the nearby tennis courts, heavily supported by the two black men. The tennis players had headed toward the main building.

"I sink I go beck up for a few minutes," Papa told Mama. "I be right down."

Mama nodded. Papa rose from the chaise longue and made his way toward the hotel. There might be an opportunity here, and Karl Machtinger was not a man to miss chances. Alertness was important in life, as witness the time his previous shop foreman, Gunther Schroeder, had turned his back on a still-lit propane soldering torch. Karl, who'd received a disappointing wage review from Schroeder, had acted without hesitation: a short tug on the gas line to turn the torch around, and the foreman had been transformed into a flaming scarecrow, progressing screaming through the aisles of machinery in comically accelerated, uncoordinated jerks and twitches. Gunther Schroeder had learned *his* lesson, Papa thought now, going up in the elevator. He couldn't help but smile. The Dark People were obviously going back to their room now. One of them was injured somehow, perhaps more than one. What was natural to do when injured and exhausted from tennis? Why, take a nap, of course! The Dark People were notorious for their sloth anyway, thought Papa. The most logical and reasonable thing they could do was grab some sleep.

Papa felt especially cheerful and refreshed when he exited on the fourth floor.

On the floor below, Willis and Chauncey struggled manfully to move Bettina through the open door into her room.

"All right," said Willis. "Easy now. Easy. Ease her in. Ease her in."

Chauncey grunted and exhaled heavily. "I think my hernia is developing a hernia."

"To the right," said Willis. "To the right!"

"My right or your right?" said Chauncey. "We're facing opposite ways, pea-brain."

"My right," said Willis. "You don't have any right."

They got Bettina inside and leaned her up against a lounge chair.

"I feel," said Bettina, "like a small tree that's just been flattened by a tank. Are there any tread marks on my backside?"

Willis ignored her. "Lola, go in the bathroom and get a cold, wet towel. And get some ice cubes."

"Yes, Dr. Welby," said Lola, hurrying off.

"Let's get this one into bed," said Willis to Chauncey.

Chauncey was looking around. "You mean this is *all your room?*"

"Far as the eye can see," said Willis. "Course, the fence on the north forty needs fixin', but otherwise she's a pretty piece of real estate."

"I slept standing up," said Chauncey, shaking his head. "We're enduring conditions that are medieval—wallowing in plague and unspeakable filth—while you're living like the King and Queen of England?"

"The Queen is about to abdicate her *leg* if we don't get her down," said Willis.

From the bathroom came the sound of crashing glass, followed by an, "Oh, God!"

"What happened?" yelled Willis.

Lola came back, looking sheepish. "I broke a bottle of perfume. Gee, I'm sorry, Bett."

"Don't worry about it," said Bettina.

"I'm really—was it expensive? It didn't look that expensive. I mean, the bottle was very small."

"Expensive?" said Bettina. "Nah. That? It was

Mon Fleur. Not expensive. Ninety dollars an ounce is all."

Willis felt himself begin to grow faint. "Ninety dollars an—Jesus!" He turned to Lola. "Of all the stupid ass things to do."

"You watch your mouth," said Chauncey quickly. "She didn't do it on purpose."

"Right!" said Willis. "Accidents don't count. Except my wife is out ninety dollars, and I've got a beautiful-smelling bathroom."

"Be grateful you don't have an underwater bathroom like we do!" said Chauncey.

"I'll be grateful when I see the last of you and your fat mouth," said Willis.

Chauncey loosened his grip on Bettina. "I don't have to take this crap. I can go back upstairs to my cigar box and watch television."

"Forget it, both of you," said Bettina, wobbling as she tried to stand alone. "I think the bones are beginning to knit themselves. Another two months in this position and I'm good as new." She steadied herself by grabbing onto the chair.

"That's right," said Willis to Chauncey. "Let her fall. Stand there and watch the woman fall. Don't make a move. Commit your assault-by-inaction."

"I cut my finger," said Lola softly, holding up her hand to show the trickle of blood running down into her palm. "I'm bleeding," she said unnecessarily. "Oh, damn, the perfume burns!" She winced in pain.

"Only *good* perfume," corrected Willis. "Cheap perfume, you can't feel at all."

"Bett," said Lola. "Just remember, there's broken glass on the bathroom floor. Be careful where you step."

Bettina nodded. "Oh, I'm glad you told me. I was going to go hiking in there today."

Lola shook her hand. "Willis, do you have a Band-Aid?"

"Can we take care of one casualty at a time?" said Willis. "Look, how about getting that wet towel?"

Lola went back into the bathroom.

Bettina squinted. "There's the bed, men, straight ahead. I can see it from here."

"Grab her!" said Chauncey to Willis. "Come on, grab her." He gripped Bettina's shoulder. "Do you want help—or not?"

"You talking to me?" said Bettina.

"Yes, I'm talking to you," said Chauncey. "My idea of a hundred-dollar-a-day vacation is not to stand here imitating a coat-tree. I got better things I can imitate."

"Help," said Bettina immediately. "I choose . . . help." She put an arm around each of the men.

"All right," said Chauncey. "Which way are we going to go?"

"North by northeast," said Willis. "What do you mean, which way are we going to go? You want coordinates?"

"Frontwards or backwards?" said Chauncey. "Even a brain-deprived person like yourself should be able to understand that choice."

"Whichever one you do," said Bettina, "just don't surprise me. Or each other."

"Backwards," said Willis. "Put her down ass backwards."

"Willis—" said Bettina.

"That's the way he does everything," said Chauncey. "I was expecting it."

"Ready?" said Willis.

"All right, when I say three," said Chauncey, "we sit on the bed. Okay? One—two—"

"Me also?" said Bettina.

Chauncey looked away, then quickly back. "No, not you, I was referring to Reggie Jackson. *Certainly*, you too! Jeee-sus!"

"Yell," said Willis. "That's right. Show us your bedside manner, doctor. Yell at a woman with a broken, sprained ankle. I suppose you bawl out your terminal patients if they belch after eating."

"*Three!*" said Bettina loudly. "*Three!* Is anyone out there? Can anyone hear? For God's sake, *three!*"

Lifting together, the men had Bettina three-quarters into the bed when there was a dull thud from the bathroom, followed by a moan. Lola's face, her eyes glazed, appeared in the doorway.

"Help me. Help me, somebody," she said thickly.

"What happened?" said Chauncey excitedly, dropping his half of Bettina.

"My head," said Lola. "I banged my head." She began to sway.

"On what?"

"Medicine cabinet. I'm gonna pass out. Ohh . . . I'm passing . . . passinggg . . ." Her eyes rolled upward and she folded slowly to the floor.

Chauncey rushed to his wife and bent over her unconscious body. "Lola! Lola, honey!"

"Me first," said Bettina from the bed. "I was first ahead of her."

"But *she's* out cold," said Chauncey. "As triage officer here, I say that puts her ahead. Get me a wet towel, somebody."

"He must mean you," said Bettina to Willis. "I'm excused."

Chauncey was feeling Lola's wrist for a pulse. "It's all right, honey. You're okay, honey. Just knocked yourself a little unconscious is all. You're all right."

"Don't lie to the woman," said Willis. "She knows she's not okay. Any fool can deduce it's not normal to be out cold in a doorway."

Chauncey looked up. "If you didn't rush her, this wouldn't have happened. That's a concussion."

"You're going to blame me," said Willis incredulously, "because your wife doesn't know how to get up from a sink? Why don't you blame me for awakening in the morning?"

"I blame you for me not sleeping all night," said Chauncey. "That's closer to the facts."

Lola groaned, and her eyes fluttered open. She wiped her forehead, then examined her finger. "I'm bleeding. See? See the blood there? My head is hemorrhaging."

"That's your finger," said Chauncey. "Your finger is bleeding on your head." He turned to shout at Willis. "Will you get me a towel!"

"As long as you asked so politely," said Willis. He started for the bathroom.

"I'm never playing tennis again," said Bettina. "I'll play something safe, like ice hockey."

From the bathroom came the crunch of broken glass being crushed underfoot, followed by a howl of pain and the sound of a fist banging on the wall.

"Willis," said Bettina calmly.

"Must've stepped on the perfume bottle," said Chauncey. He turned to Lola, who was still resting on the floor. "Watch it, honey," he said. "You're bleeding on his rug. He'll charge me for it."

Willis came back into the room, limping heavily. He threw a load of wet towels at Chauncey's face. "Here. Choke on them."

"Now, now," said Chauncey. "No need to get testy."

Willis sat down next to Lola. "Never mind testy. A piece of glass went through my goddam sneakers. I hope you're satisfied." He began to undo his laces.

In the room above them all, a rotund German tourist had his eye pressed to a hole that he'd drilled in the floor. He was convulsed with laughter. These people were the most clumsy, uncontrolled, dangerous human beings

he had ever seen. He wondered what the men did for a livelihood. Most likely stunt men or zoo keepers, he thought. They were terrors, these people. Put them in an enemy army and in no time they'd reduce the number of troops by half. For a moment, Papa Karl wondered whether he ought to go ahead with his "lesson." After all, the greatest physical danger for these madmen would be simply to leave them alone with each other. Almost, he was tempted simply to keep watching and do absolutely nothing. Almost.

19

Millie leaned over and looked. There, sleeping in her husband's bed, was a beautiful, melon-breasted, completely naked redhaired woman. Millie's brain could not construct the image of such a person being intimate with her husband. Marvin—and this? Phhhhhht! Millie laughed. She laughed for about fifty seconds, until she finally regained her voice.

Marvin, who'd been watching, also laughed, but his laugh was one of horrified disbelief. "You think it's funny?" he said. "You know, you're right. You're exactly right. That's the perfect reaction. What else is this but a laugh? That's all. Just a laugh."

Millie stopped laughing. "One . . . two . . . three," she said. "I'm praying, Marvin."

"Yes," he said. "That, too. Prayer. Prayer is good. Mine didn't work, but that's understandable."

"I'm praying the maid came in here to clean, got dizzy from overwork, and fainted in your bed."

Marvin's face brightened. "You know, as a matter of fact—"

Millie was staring at him.

"It's not the maid," he said. "I wish it were, but it's not."

"Then I'm very anxious to hear who she is, Marvin," said Millie. "I can't *wait* to hear what you have to say next. I can't wait, but I'm waiting."

"I'm waiting, too," said Marvin nervously.

"Do you know what my guess is?" said Millie. "Shall I give you my speculation on this, my theory? My guess is—that's a woman in your bed."

"That's my guess, too, Millie."

"*What* woman, you can tell me in court!" said Millie. She got off the bed, being scrupulously careful to avoid looking at Marvin.

"Millie—"

"I'm leaving now, Marvin."

"You don't have to leave. Why leave?"

"But before I go, I want to ask you one silly question."

"Stay, don't leave."

"Why doesn't she move?"

"I can explain that," said Marvin quickly. "*That* is one thing that can be explained."

"If you tell me," said Millie, "that you've been carrying on with a helpless paralytic, Marvin, I won't buy it." She stalked out into the living room.

Marvin followed her. "She finished a whole bottle of tequila by herself," he said. "That's the reason she's out cold."

"And what is the reason I'm out cold?" said Millie. "Why have you left me out in the cold? Explain that."

"Millie," said Marvin. "I'm at the mercy of the court. I deny nothing."

Millie guffawed. "Interesting, because I accuse

you of everything." She picked up her purse and headed for the door.

"Millie, wait—"

Millie whirled. "Just tell me! Is it a hooker, Marvin? Is it someone you know, or is it a hooker?"

"Which would be better?" Marvin whispered.

"If it's a hooker," said Millie, "I'm simply going to divorce you. If it's someone you know, I'm going to kill you! You decide." She opened the door to the corridor and slammed it behind her.

Marvin raced after her. "I don't know her!" he shouted down the hall. Two chambermaids looked up from where they were standing near a linen cart.

Marvin pulled alongside Millie. "I never met her."

"Says you."

"Yes, says me. Millie, I've never lied to you."

Millie looked at him incredulously. "Nev—? What do you call that back there?"

"That?" Marvin shook his head. "It was something, but not a lie. I mean, when you saw that woman in the bed I didn't tell you there *wasn't* a woman in the bed. Did I ever say that?"

Millie went on walking. "You're incoherent."

"Millie," said Marvin. "The girl is nothing. It could've been a plastic dummy. We exchanged three words the whole night."

"I can guess the three words," said Millie.

"So can I," whispered one chambermaid to the other. "My guess is, 'I love you.'"

"My guess is, 'Let's get naked,' " said the other maid.

Millie pressed the elevator button. "I don't want to hear anything you say, Marvin," she said.

"Millie, I'm guilty," he said. "I admit it! I have sinned!"

"Admission has nothing to do with absolution," said Millie.

Marvin seemed not to have heard. "I tell you freely, I have transgressed." He turned back and said it louder, so the chambermaids could hear. "I did a terrible thing. I have committed adultery."

The elevator came, and Millie stepped into the car. Marvin pivoted just in time to see the doors closing.

"In *her* condition," said Millie through the narrowing crack, "it was necrophilia." She disappeared.

Marvin headed for the stairs.

"Don't worry about it!" one of the chambermaids yelled after him.

When Millie stepped out of the elevator in the lobby, Marvin was right there.

"We were dead drunk," he said as Millie walked past him, her head turned away. "The both of us."

"I don't care if you were under anesthesia," muttered Millie.

"Do you think I would do something like that stone sober?" Marvin had to trot to keep up with her.

"Marvin, at this point I really don't know. I mean, I realize that if you could do something like this, I don't know you at all." She stopped and turned to face him. The truth of her own words frightened her. "I mean, who are you?"

"Millie, you know who I am. I'm Marvin. Marvin, your husband."

Millie shook her head. "Don't try to escape in literalness, Marvin. I mean, who are you really? I've lived with you all these years, but you could be anyone. To go ahead and do something like this . . . You're a stranger to me. What are you, a hit man? Are you a hit man for the Mafia, Marvin?"

Marvin rolled his eyes. "Jesus, you're saying abso-

lute wildness, Millie. How could I be in the Mafia? They don't have furriers in the Mafia."

"And let me tell you something else, Mr. Stranger, whoever you are," said Millie. "You recall our discussion from before? Well, being cruel to the children is Number Two. That"—she pointed toward the ceiling—"is Number One."

Marvin held out his hand. "To you, Millie. I can understand it being important to you."

"Oh, I see. To me. And to you it was nothing. Like having an eggcream, maybe? Like putting on a sock? Inter-mingling one of your organs with one of hers is nothing?"

"To me it was meaningless," said Marvin.

"That's a shame, Marvin. I always get so upset when you don't have a good time."

Millie walked through the lobby and went out the front entrance, Marvin trailing after her. They continued along the side of the driveway.

"Does it help you to know I didn't send for her?" Marvin pleaded. "I never asked her to come."

"You mean 'to climax'? You never asked her to reach orgasm?" said Millie.

"Millie, please. Talk to me like a human being."

"Why should I?"

"I never asked her to come to my room."

"Really?" said Millie. "Who sent her up? God? Room service?"

Marvin ran in front of her, blocking her path. "She was a gift. A surprise gift." He paused. "A foolish gift to a foolish man."

Millie looked at him. "You'll excuse me if I don't show my pity."

"Someone sent her over. I didn't even pay for it."

For the first time since The Great Discovery, Millie showed some interest. "No? . . . Then who did?"

They were in the middle of a street. People passed

them from both directions. Marvin hesitated. "Look, what's really the difference?"

"Who did?"

An old man turned to stare. "It's not important," said Marvin.

"I'd like to know."

"Millie, it's over. As far as I'm concerned, it's behind us, forgotten."

"Really?" said Millie. "If that's what you think, then you must've had a lobotomy last night along with getting laid."

"Mill—"

Millie began to nod, aware suddenly of a dawning truth, and then she started to walk again. "Your brother Harry. He's the only one you know in California."

"No," said Marvin quickly. "I know two other people also. Cousins. Removed cousins."

"It was your brother, wasn't it? Wasn't it? My God, I heard of fancy bar mitzvahs, but this is outrageous." She stepped up her pace, leaving a stunned Marvin behind.

After a moment, he caught up again. "He meant well, Millie."

"So did Attila the Hun."

"You know Harry would never hurt anyone."

"Just tell me," said Millie. "Did he send one to all the men? What do the women get, a bottle of perfume?"

"Millie, please, give me two minutes to explain."

"Why should I?" said Millie.

"Two minutes is all I ask. A minute for every eight years we've been married."

Millie sat down on a bench. An old woman sat next to her, knitting. Millie fanned herself with her hand. "I'm in shock, you know that? I'm in total shock. It's just beginning to hit me."

Marvin lingered over her in helpless futility.

The old woman looked up. "What hit you?" she said to Millie. "He hit you?"

"I never hit her," said Marvin.

"Tell her what happened, Marvin," said Millie. "I want to hear."

"Please, Millie, for the sake of the children."

"Oh," said Millie. "Now you invoke the children. Where were the sakes of the children last night, huh? Tell me that."

"You know where their sakes were, Millie. Can't we go on from here?"

"If he hit you, you should go to the cops," said the old woman.

"Tell her, Marvin."

Marvin gestured helplessly with his hands. "It was nothing. Last night . . . there was a girl . . . she was in my bed . . . naked . . . and I—Jesus!" He shook his head. "This is ridiculous. Why the hell am I telling this to a stranger?"

Millie rose from the bench and strode away.

"What happened then?" the old woman asked Marvin. "Don't leave me hanging."

"I bludgeoned her to death," Marvin called back over his shoulder as he took off after Millie. "Cut the body into a million pieces."

"Bullshit," said the old woman.

Marvin was breathing heavily when he finally caught up again with Millie, who showed no sign of fatigue.

Marvin said, "When Harry was sixteen years old, I—Jesus, can you slow down?—I gave him a birthday present."

"No time for touching stories, Marvin."

"It [gasp] was his first woman. What're you, a

decathlon candidate? Anyway, he's been wanting to repay me for years."

"He couldn't give you a government bond?"

"He knows," said Marvin, "that in the sixteen years we've been married, I never even looked at another woman. So last night we had a few laughs, a few drinks, and he said when I got back to my room, he'd have a present waiting there for me."

"And you were expecting, maybe, a hammer and nails or a box of clay."

"I didn't know what to expect. I was half conscious. I certainly never expected anything like *her*. I thought maybe a basket of fruit. . . ."

Millie slowed down. Her voice softened. "It must have been . . . exciting for you."

Marvin shrugged. "Look, she was there. She was naked . . . attractive . . . she was a little tight. No, I don't mean tight like that. And she was paid for."

"And irresistible."

"Yes. You want the truth, in my condition, in hers—absolutely. Really, I don't think there are ten normal men in the whole country who, in the same circumstances, could have resisted the temptation."

"And nine of those are in the priesthood, right?"

"And the tenth is Ralph Nader," said Marvin. "Look, I don't know. I just . . . I don't think I'm that much different from anyone else."

Millie looked away. "And did it feel fantastic?"

"It felt—you wanna know how it felt?—remember when you had to urinate back at the hotel? And how wonderful it was when you finally did it? Well, that's how this felt. You understand what I'm telling you? A body function, that's all it was. I sunk it in, released a small quantity of stored fluid, and that was the end."

"You make it sound like you gave her a flu shot."

"Besides," said Marvin, "I didn't want to insult Harry. He did it out of love."

"Not for me."

"True. Harry is not a deep thinker. He's not even a clear thinker. He's impulsive, always has been. He's also a child. He was a baby all his life, and he's never grown up. You know what his family life is like. But he's not malicious. He does not intentionally seek to hurt anyone." He paused. "Look, it's no excuse for me. I have no excuses."

"'No excuse' is an excuse," said Millie. "It implies that because of your charming and naive honesty you should be relieved of your burden of guilt. Well, I don't buy it."

"I know that, Millie. I just wanted to tell you that not only did I not enjoy it, I don't even remember it. That's the story. If you still want to leave me, I understand."

"Good, I'm glad of that."

"And when I kill myself, I hope *you* understand."

Millie took a deep breath. "Speaking of theatrics, did you bring the camera, Marvin?"

"The camera?"

"I want a picture of our first trip to California. Just the three of us."

Marvin held up his hands. "Okay. That's okay, Millie. Get it out. Let loose."

"If you're expecting an instant nervous breakdown, or one of those crying, hysterical outbursts," said Millie, "forget it. I wouldn't give you the satisfaction. You're not *worth* crying over."

"Good," said Marvin. "Good. Keep talking. The quicker you get it out, the quicker you'll be rid of it."

"This is not a piece of stale mozzarella cheese I've just eaten," said Millie. "Is that your idea? That I'll just spit it up, and then everything will be fine again?"

"No," said Marvin.

A losing battle, he thought. One night, one lousy night, and I've ruined my life. The truth was uncomfortably clear. She would never forget, never forgive. The best he could hope for was that she would simply live with it—a constant pain, arthritis of the heart.

"Just tell me," said Millie. "What do I do now? Do you expect me to go to your nephew's bar mitzvah and say congratulations to the man who paid for that woman to fiddle with my husband? How can I even look at him again? And how can he look at me? He'll see you come in, he'll probably wink at you."

"He doesn't know that you know," said Marvin softly.

"Ohhh," said Millie. "I see. Then the joke's on him. Only you and I know that I know."

They passed a small luncheonette, and Marvin beckoned Millie inside. "Please. Just for coffee." He was astonished when she agreed. They sat in a booth near the rear.

"You're right," Marvin said after they'd ordered. He pinched his lips together. "You don't deserve to be treated like that. I'd feel the same way."

"Thank you," said Millie. "I'm glad you can understand."

In her eyes, Marvin saw . . . hope. Hope for himself. "Forget the bar mitzvah. I'll go back on the next plane with you, if that's what you want."

Millie looked at him steadily. "No," she said finally. "That is not what I want. I will not give you or your family that satisfaction. I am going to behave with more dignity than you ever dreamed of. I am going to that bar mitzvah."

Marvin felt like he was coming apart. He was, he knew, witnessing one of those small acts of human

courage that were scarcely ever noted, much less appreciated.

"And I am going with my head held high," continued Millie. "I am not going to divorce you. I am going to try to forgive you. I am going to attempt to place this in a small compartment of my brain and never open that place again. I am going to understand the reason why it happened, but I will not speak of it any more for as long as I live."

Marvin looked at her across the table. Despite what she'd said, the tears were rolling out of the corners of her eyes.

"And after I've finished my coffee," added Millie, "you will return to the hotel to contemplate the Sleeping Bimbo, and I will go on a shopping spree that, I hope, will relieve you of every last cent you've got."

20

"Does that help?" asked Willis. He was applying a wet towel to Bettina's ankle.

She winced in pain. "No," she said. "Try the other foot."

"At least you still have your sense of humor," said Willis.

Near the bathroom, Chauncey had placed his arms under Lola. "Give me a hand," he called to Willis. "Let's put her on the bed."

"Only on vacations," said Lola. "It only happens on vacations. The whole year I go without even catching cold, but put me on vacation and it's major medical time."

Willis came over and grabbed Lola's ankle. "Nice legs," he said, grinning.

"Get a tight hold," said Chauncey. "When I say lift, you lift. Ready? Lift."

They eased her over toward the bed. "Jesus," said

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Willis, "it's like Guadalcanal in here. Any minute I expect to hear someone shouting, 'Medic!'"

"Easy!" said Lola. "Forget 'medic.' Someone's shouting 'easy.' Even easier!"

"I never saw it this busy in the emergency ward," said Chauncey. "Course, I've never been on duty during a natural disaster."

Gently, the men deposited Lola on the mattress. "This bed," she said. "Look at it. It's bigger than our whole room."

Chauncey scowled and turned to Willis. "Okay, let's settle up what I owe you. Because after I pay you, I ain't ever going to *see* you. Even if you walk right in front of me, I'm not going to see you."

Chauncey walked to the small desk behind the lounge chair. From the airline bag that he used to carry his tennis balls and towel, he withdrew a wallet. From the wallet he extracted a check. "Now. How much?" He reached for the pen on the desk.

"All right, all right," said Willis. "Let's not get our noses out of joint. It's over with, let's forget it."

"Forget it," repeated Chauncey. "Now you want to forget it."

"Well, you can't forget something before it happens," said Willis logically.

"I should just forget the *year* that I planned for this vacation, huh? Pretend it never existed."

"Chaunce," said Willis, "this isn't the Alamo, although we may have more casualties. We've just been unlucky."

"You know what I got to show for this vacation?" said Chauncey. "You know what souvenirs I'm bringing back? An overdose of Japanese food, mildew in my feet from sleeping in a wet bed, a wife with a concussion, and two lawsuits for two car crashes for two times that I

wasn't driving. Don't you tell me to forget it." He began to write on the check.

"Hey, how much are you making it out for?" asked Willis.

"Blank," said Chauncey. "I'm handing you a blank check, how's that? You can fill it in, and then you can shove it up." He finished writing and thrust the check at Willis.

"Hey!" said Willis. "Watch your language in front of the ladies."

"Listen, male chauvinist pig," said Chauncey. "The ladies are unconscious. They can't hear us. I owe you for the perfume, the blood on the carpet, and the acetylene torch they used to burn us out of the car wreck. You figure out the amount. I've had enough." He curled his lower lip. "I want to go home. I need a vacation."

Willis stuck out a hand. "Now come on, buddy! Why don't we just shake and forget it ever happened?"

On the bed, Lola sat up, leaning over on one hand. "Shake with the man, Chauncey. Please."

"My leg!" screamed Bettina. "You're on my leg!"

"Sorry," said Lola. "I'm sorry."

Willis turned on her. "Watch what you're doing, you idiot!"

Chauncey's eyes glazed. "Okay," he snarled. "That did it! That's the straw that humped the camel's back. Either you apologize for calling my dear, sweet wife an idiot, or"—he picked up his tennis racket from the floor—"or I'll take this Japanese aluminum tennis racket, and backhand you to death."

Willis slowly retreated. "If it's your backhand, I have nothing to worry about," he said.

"We'll see," said Chauncey, still advancing.

"Now don't threaten me," said Willis. "Never threaten a man who spent two years working the drunk ward. Back off, man."

"Oh, God," said Bettina. "More blood is coming! We're going to need another doctor."

"Apologize!" shouted Chauncey. "I'm counting to five, and then I'm going to serve, starting with your head."

Willis kept retreating. "Don't do it. I warn you. Desist. You are a thin man, while I am a muscular man. Mess with me and they'll take you off the plane with the luggage."

"One!" said Chauncey.

"Don't fight," pleaded Bettina. "Please don't fight! It's not professional."

"Two!" said Chauncey.

"Someone'll get hurt and fall on me," said Bettina.

"Three!"

"Don't hit him with the racquet," yelled Lola. "I just had it re-strung."

"Somehow I don't think you're taking this with the proper gravity," said Willis.

"Four," said Chauncey. "I presume, doctor, you know what comes after four?"

"And I presume you know what I'm going to do to you if you swing that thing at me. They'll be showing pictures of your corpse at contortionists' conventions. I'll hurt you so bad, even *I* won't be able to fix you up. They'll need a bloodhound just to identify you."

"I'm going to say five unless you apologize," said Chauncey.

"Then say it!" shouted Willis in exasperation. "Say it! You afraid to say it? I'll say it for you. Five! You hear that? Five! I said it, all right? Five!"

"It don't count," said Chauncey, "until *I* say it. And I'm saying it. Five!"

He lunged at Willis, who stepped neatly aside and administered an edge-of-the-hand chop to the back of Chauncey's neck. Willis watched fascinated, more surprised by his own perfectly timed, instinctive karate ma-

neuver than by Chauncey's body hurtling into the bathroom. A crash came from behind the bathroom door.

"Thank God their patients aren't here to see this," said Bettina.

A moment later, Chauncey staggered out of the bathroom, yelled something unintelligible, and again charged at Willis, this time sending a knee thudding into his friend's hip. Willis reeled backward.

"Let them kill each other," said Lola to Bettina. "We have to save ourselves."

Willis braced himself against a wall. As Chauncey came at him once more, he pushed off, managing somehow to loop an arm around Chauncey's throat. To avoid being choked, Chauncey turned and ducked, and Willis seized the opportunity to crush Chauncey's neck between his biceps and body.

"Head lock!" announced Willis. "Got you in a head lock."

Chauncey gurgled.

"You want to play?" said Willis. "I know a nice little game called 'Kill Your Best Friend.'"

Chauncey wrapped one arm around Willis's waist and used the knuckles of the other to bore into Willis's back.

"Ahhhhh!" said Willis, tightening down on Chauncey's head. Just then the door opened and a chambermaid stuck her head in.

"Oh, my God!" said the maid.

"Come back later," said Willis, sidestepping the corner of the mantel into which Chauncey was attempting to shove him.

"Awwwk," said Chauncey, temporarily diverting the hand that was knuckling Willis's back to relieving the pressure on his throat.

"You can clean *him* up, too," said Willis, as

Chauncey, with a renewed burst of strength, propelled the both of them out the doorway into the corridor.

The maid, without another word, shut the door and went on to the next room.

"I don't know about you," said Bettina to Lola, "but while those two maniacs are out, I'm gonna use the opportunity to catch some sleep. I have a feeling I won't get too many more chances."

"Same here," said Lola.

Five minutes later, while Willis and Chauncey were tumbling down a staircase, both women began to doze. Ten minutes later, while Chauncey chased Willis through the downstairs arcade and out toward the pool, both women were fast asleep. They did not hear the start-up of the electric motor, one floor above them.

Papa Karl was delighted. This Dark People's demolition derby he'd been witnessing had put him in an excellent frame of mind. He placed the bottle of nitric acid on the floor beside him and gently pressed the trigger of the electric drill. The gleaming extension bit dug its way into the parqueted hardwood of the floor and then into the plywood subflooring. Papa Karl could hardly wait. What would these crazy blacks do next? Would the men trade accusations of spilling acid on each other's wives? Oh, that would be fun to see! He felt a tug as the bit pierced the subfloor and headed through the fiberglass fill into the ceiling below. What he did not feel, however, was the drill penetrating the plastic outer insulation of a Romex electrical cable, this particular line having a potential of 120 volts. That is, he did not feel it until too late, until the drill had made contact with one of the heavy copper wires, and the current began a mad rush to ground through his fat little body. Then he felt it quite distinctly. He said something that sounded like "Urrrrrrgh!" and tried to pull his right foot, still wet with water from the

pool area, away from where he'd braced himself against the hot-air vent on the wall.

And he discovered an amazing thing. His own muscles refused to obey him, preferring instead to do a jerky, thrashing, most ungraceful dance in time to a driving 60 cycle beat. How Papa squirmed at the end of the drill! Papa's eyes bulged and his tongue came out, and he gasped. And still he was impaled on the hook of electricity, unable to let go. Were the circumstances only slightly different, were Papa the observer instead of the participant, if this were happening to one of the blacks, Papa would doubtless have laughed himself silly over the image. To see a grown man flop, actually flop! His free hand scratched in twitchy spasms on the floor, spilling the bottle of concentrated nitric. Papa's heart fluttered once, twice, and then decided to rest. Too much excitement for one day! After a while, the weight of Papa's limp body pushed the drill through the cable, breaking the circuit and reducing the flow of current to zero. A woman two floors below became highly irritated that her hair dryer had gone off. A man four rooms away searched for the guarantee form on his electric razor.

Papa, meanwhile, lay in permanent stasis, his eyes wide open, staring. A man should keep his eyes open, Papa had always believed. And his feet rooted firmly to the ground.

The naked redhead was still asleep on the bed. It takes the liver and kidneys quite some time to filter an entire bottle of tequila out of a person's blood stream.

Marvin paced the room, muttering. Who else was there to talk to but himself?

"Let her spend it all, I don't care. At least I won't have to pay her alimony."

Suddenly, the door from the living room opened and Mildred stood framed in the doorway.

"Mildred! You've come back!"

Mildred looked around, spotted the redhead. "No word from Sleeping Beauty?"

Marvin rushed over and kissed his wife's hand. "Forget about her! Oh, Mildred!" He began to sob.

The phone rang, and Millie crossed over to the other side of the bed and lifted the receiver. "Hello? Who? Oh, yes, put them on." She looked over at Marvin, who had slumped, still sobbing, into a chair. "Marvin, the kids are calling."

Marvin nodded.

"Hello, darling," said Millie into the phone. "How are you?" She listened. "You miss me? Well, I miss you, too." She reclined on the bed and kicked off her shoes. "Oh, Daddy's fine. No, he likes it here. He's made a lot of new friends." Again, she listened. "On the plane? Oh, some movie with Charles Bronson."

Next to her, the redhead shifted and a limp arm fell across Millie's chest.

"Oh, the hotel is beautiful," continued Millie, regarding the arm with a kind of amused horror. "We have a great suite all to ourselves." She shuddered. "Well, sort of all to ourselves . . ."

Willis passed the busboy on the dead run. "Call the manager! Get the bell captain!"

Before the busboy could react, Willis was gone, replaced by Chauncey, who carried a fire ax he had found in one of the corridors. "If you call anyone," he gasped, "I'm coming back for you." Then he, too, disappeared.

Willis ran down the steps to the pool area and came to the turnstile. The pool attendant behind the desk held out a sheet of paper. "Sign in, please."

Willis wrote frantically, dropping the pen just as Chauncey appeared at the top of the steps.

"The hunted becomes the hunter!" yelled Chauncey.

Willis tore off around the edge of the pool, and Chauncey crawled under the turnstile and followed him.

Mama Machtinger, reclining on a chaise longue, lifted her head. She watched intently. Weren't these two the same men with whom they'd had the auto accident yesterday morning? What a strange coincidence! She followed Willis in his flight until he crawled over an empty chaise five feet away.

"Luffly country you haf here!" called Mama pleasantly.

Willis glanced at her, then hurried on.

The two women reclined on the bed.

"This is pleasant," said Lola. "This is the best time I've had on the whole vacation."

Before Bettina could answer, the door opened. Chauncey walked in, dripping wet. He was followed by a bent-over Willis, holding his groin.

"He kicked me," said Willis. "How could he do that?" He staggered to a chair.

"He pushed me in the pool," said Chauncey. "I nearly drowned."

"I could make a living just from the injuries in this room," moaned Willis through clenched teeth.

"I still didn't get my apology," said Chauncey stiffly. "I can't hit, I can't fight, and I can't run. But I can still bite." He looked at Willis malevolently. "Now give me my apology."

Willis had just begun to stretch out. "You know what you told me I can do with my check? Well, you can do it with your aluminum racquet."

Chauncey lunged at him, but Willis caught him with a surprise palm to the throat and forced him down to the carpet.

Kneeling on Chauncey's chest, Willis pressed downward on his Adam's apple. "We came here friends and we're leaving friends. Now tell me we're friends, you bastard!"

"Friends!" said Chauncey. "Friends. Best friends."

"And tell me you had a good time on our vacation."

"The best," gasped Chauncey. "Best time I ever had in my whole life."

Willis kept up the steady pressure. "And you loved the Japanese restaurants."

Chauncey felt his vision begin to grow black. "I could eat it every day. . . . Except I can't breathe. Can't eat it if I can't breathe. . . . My ribs are cracking."

"And you want to take another vacation with us next year!" Willis grinned.

"Nnnn," said Chauncey. *In extremis*, some people can muster up courage beyond themselves. "Crack my ribs," he choked out. "Crush me! I won't say it."

"Say it," said Lola.

"Say it," said Bettina.

Willis nodded. "I think I'd reconsider my position on this one, Chaunce. From what I've heard, the human brain can last without air only five or six minutes. Personally, I've got all day." He tightened his grip slightly. "Up to you, of course."

Marvin paced nervously outside the beauty parlor in the hotel's arcade. He had opened a button on his suit jacket and was checking his watch when Millie emerged and came toward him.

"You wouldn't believe what they charged for a rinse," she said. "I could have gotten a new head for that much money."

"You look beautiful," said Marvin, taking her

elbow. "Come on. I've had a cab waiting outside for twenty minutes."

They walked up the stairs into the lobby.

"What happened to our roommate?" said Millie.

"Gone," said Marvin. "Finally. She couldn't find her shoes. I gave her yours."

"You gave her *my* shoes?" said Millie.

"Mill, anything. Anything to get rid of her. It was no time to be fussy."

Outside, in front of the hotel entrance, a woman in a trench coat and bandana was just getting into a taxi. Marvin sprinted ahead.

"Hey! Hold it! Wait a second! That's my cab!"

The doorman trailed after him uncertainly. "I'm sorry, sir. I couldn't hold it any longer."

"Damn!" said Marvin. "All right, get me another cab."

"It'll take about twenty minutes, sir," said the doorman.

"I knew it," said Marvin angrily. "We're going to be late. I knew it."

The girl in the taxi stuck her head out the window. "Hi!" she said pleasantly. "Can I give you a lift?"

Marvin stared in disbelief. It was Bunny. "Oh, Jesus!" he said. "Hello. No. No, thanks. Well, just . . . wait."

Millie came up behind him and spoke to Bunny over his shoulder. "Thank you," she said. "That's very kind of you." She tapped Marvin on the back. "Get in the cab."

Marvin turned. "Are you serious?"

"I didn't come three thousand miles to be late," said Millie. "Get in the cab."

"Do you know who's in there?"

"Yes. It's our hooker. You think I'd ride with strangers?"

They stepped into the cab.

"This is awfully nice of you," said Millie to Bunny.

The taxi pulled slowly away.

"What a beautiful pair of shoes!" commented Millie.

Marvin, his face pressed to the window, whimpered softly.

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The four of them trailed behind the skycap, looking like an advertisement for medical insurance. Slowly, they made their way toward the ticket counter.

"I called the kids," said Bettina, looking up from the wheelchair. "I told them not to meet us at the airport. I don't want them seeing us like this."

Willis tapped her on the leg cast. "Good thinking," he said.

"Sorry about dropping that suitcase, sir," said the skycap to Willis.

"It's all right," said Willis. "It wasn't the foot with the glass in it." He limped toward the check-in counter.

Lola adjusted her eyepatch. "Tell the hostess I have to sit with my good eye near the window," she said to Chauncey. "I don't want to miss the Grand Canyon again."

Chauncey stared straight ahead, the only direction

permitted by his foam-rubber neck-and-chin brace. "How am I going to give a lecture and operate on Monday?" he said through clenched teeth. "I can't speak and I can't look down."

No one offered a suggestion.

From another part of the airport, Karl Machtinger was also going home. True, he rode in a different part of the plane from the other passengers, but in some ways it was even more luxurious. It was private, it was sculpted, and it was sealed. And Mama had even made sure that it was lined with velvety cloth so that Papa would be comfortable. Oh, sure, he liked the cold—was even used to it from skiing. But nobody, absolutely nobody, enjoys the weather at thirty-six thousand feet.

The stewardess's voice came softly over the public address system.

"Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. Welcome aboard Flight two-eleven to New York and London. Our flying time this afternoon will be four hours and fifty minutes, and we will be cruising at an altitude of thirty-six thousand feet. We will now serve cocktails and beverages, after which we will serve lunch, followed by our film, *No Left Turns*, starring Diana Barrie. Thank you."

Diana squirmed in her seat. "Oh, Christ! Let's get off, Sidney. Tell them to let us off the bloody plane!"

But Sidney, already feigning sleep, said nothing.

The End

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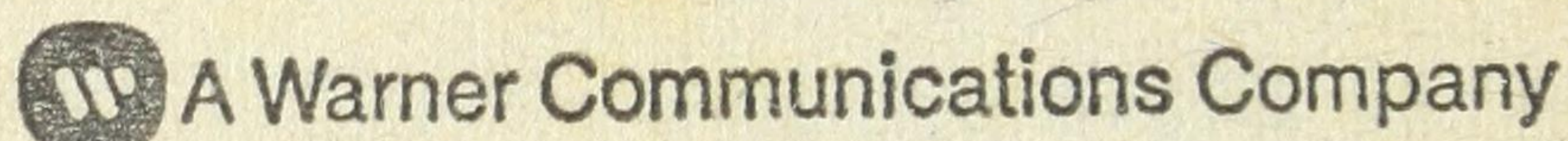
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